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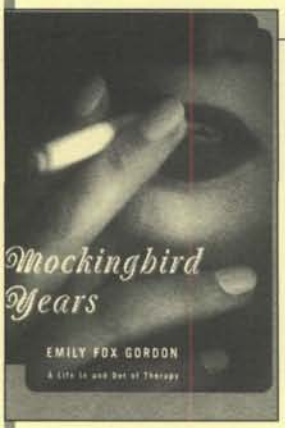

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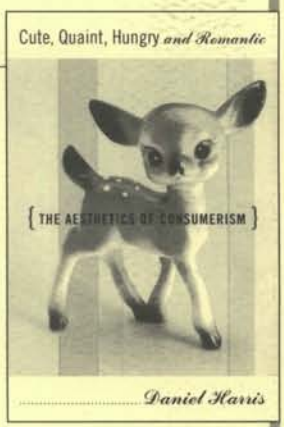

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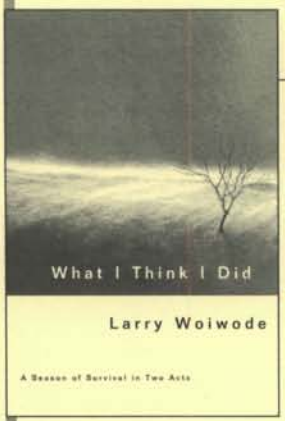

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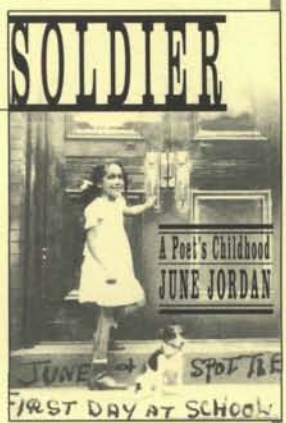

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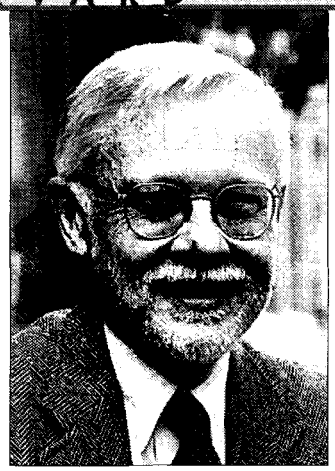

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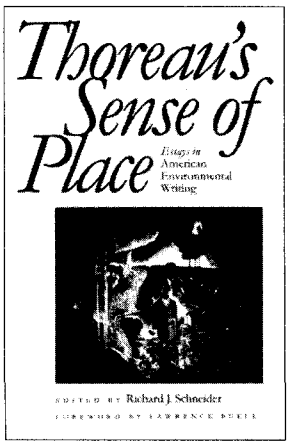

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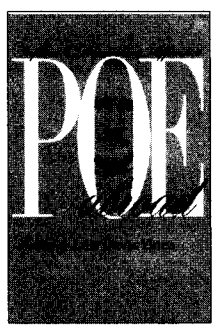

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—RALPH WALDO EMERSON, "The American Scholar," 1837

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Grief

Two pieces in this issue touch, directly or tangentially, on mourning. One is by Francine du Plessix Gray, who will write the "At Large and At Small" column each summer. "My stepfather and my best friend had died within four days of each other," she says, "and that accumulation of death made me think about mourning. When I wrote the column, I had just completed a biography of Simone Weil, and I suppose I was completing my mourning for Simone, too. I couldn't have finished that book without visiting her grave in Ashford, England, just the way you aren't ready to finish your life until you've properly mourned the people you've loved."

Gray's father died in World War II, when she was nine. Her mother concealed his death from her for more than a year. When she was in her forties, Gray wrote *Lovers and Tyrants*, a novel whose central character loses her father under similar circumstances and spins elaborate fantasies to explain why he has not returned: he is hiding off the coast of Zanzibar, he is living incognito in Tangier, he is disguised in a Damascus souk. Gray says it took her decades to learn how to mourn her father properly. This essay may be the completion of a sixty-year process. "I have been thinking about the different ways Homer and Freud stress the importance of mourning," she says. "You have to do it right. If you botch it, you're like Hamlet: you can't graduate from stage to stage."

Each issue of the SCHOLAR contains an excerpt from a journal. On August 8, 1991, David Michaelis spent eight hours at a friend's dining table writing about a single day in Provincetown, Massachusetts. His journal entry mourns a lost mother and a lost home. "I wrote it on a little electronic typewriter with a digital display of about three inches," says Michaelis. "It was during a period of blockage, when I was trying to write a novel but was lucky to finish five hundred words a day. This was five *thousand.* I sat down to write what I absolutely knew out of my heart and eye and ear and nose, about a place I knew every square inch of, and I suddenly felt hot, as if I could feel the blood flowing through me. I was thirty-three, and I'd been stuck in my grief for my mother for ten years, growing backward instead of forward. Writing this journal made me see that clearly. It also showed me I should be a nonfiction writer, not a novelist. The next day, I met my future wife. These words marked the end of a decade of self-exile and the start of my present life. The evolution of myself into Clara Bingham's husband, Jamie and Henry Michaelis's father, and N. C. Wyeth's biographer began at that dining table on Cape Cod."

A. F.

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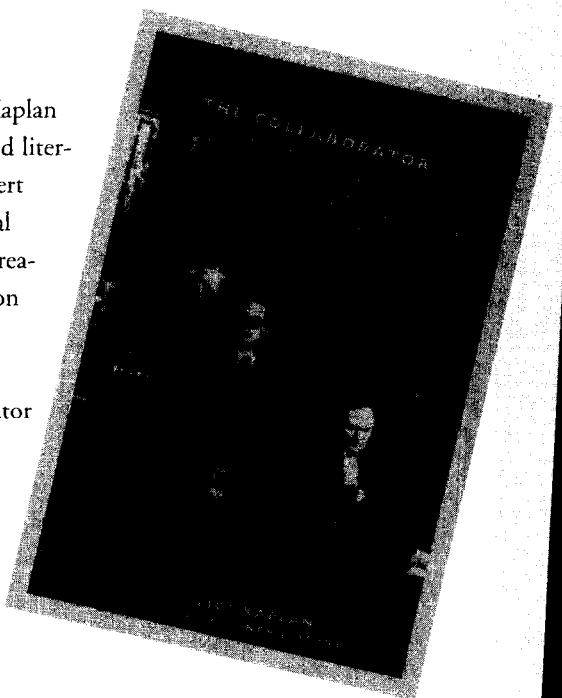

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AT LARGE AND AT SMALL

The Work of Mourning

FRANCINE DU PLESSIX GRAY

I

Mourning is my theme, and a stack of recently published volumes on "grief work," as the counseling industry now calls bereavement, accumulates on my desk. If books are any harbinger of the communal psyche, taboos against the theme of death—an issue more rigorously banned from public discourse, in our time, than the most explicit sexuality—might well be waning. Consider these literary highlights: the most enduring title on the current best-seller list, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, chronicles the author's conversations with his dying mentor; the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for drama was awarded to *Wit*, which concerns a woman living through the last months of terminal cancer; outstanding among the nonfiction books of 1998 was Leon Wieseltier's *Kaddish*, a record of his mourning for his dead father; the spring's most prominent novel was Saul Bellow's *Ravelstein*, which is arguably an AIDS-memoir-cloaked-as-fiction; and among First Books, the literary phenomenon of the year is Dave Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, the saga of two brothers, aged twenty-one and eight, who bravely and often farcically grieve for the deaths, six weeks apart, of their mother and father.

But the bulk of this literature of bereavement, a subdivision of the "recovery" genre filled with such buzz phrases as "coping responses," "task-based grief," "tactics for healing," and "tools for recovery," is far more pragmatically inclined. Typical recent titles are *The Mourning Handbook* and *Living with the End in Mind: A Practical Checklist for Living Life to the Fullest by Embracing Your Mortality*, which describes itself as "a comprehensive, well-thought-out plan for preparing for death." Some of Bereavement Lit's most popular offerings suggest "strategies" for coping with the death of mothers, such as *A Mother Loss Workbook: Healing Exercises for Daughters*. And within that category lies a specific subdivision that urges us to see mom's passing as "A Way to Grow," such as *Remembering Mother, Finding Myself* and *Losing Your Parents, Finding Your Self*, the latter of which, the publishers claim, is bound "to strike a chord with baby boomers everywhere."

The shift of consciousness might well be traced to the pioneering work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, who for the third consecutive decade is urging us to weave the expectation of death into our understanding of life, to look on it as an expected companion rather than a dreaded stranger. Baby boomers—that demanding generation which came of age in the 1960s—are indeed beginning to confront the anxieties of aging and mortality. And the AIDS epidemic, which makes us cohabit with death more poignantly than at any other time in recent memory, may also be playing a dominant role in loosening our traditional reserve. It is worth noting that men are increasingly taking over the role of public mourner traditionally assigned, in the West, to women. The most unspeakable of losses, for instance, the death of children, is now frequently chronicled by men, some of them prominent journalists—witness *Being Brett: Chronicle of a Daughter's Death*, by Douglas Hobbie; *Give Sorrow Words: A Father's Passage Through Grief*, by Tom Crider; and *In the Wake of Death, Surviving the Loss of a Child*, by Mark Cosman.

The literature of widowhood—still predomi-

Francine du Plessix Gray is the author, most recently, of *At Home with the Marquis de Sade: A Life* and of a biography of Simone Weil that will be published in the Penguin Lives Series.

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nantly a female genre—is equally abundant and often bears startlingly upbeat titles, such as *From Grief to Gladness: Coming Back from Widowhood* and *Widow to Widow: Thoughtful, Practical Ideas for Rebuilding Your Life* (readers' comments on Amazon.com: "indispensable tool," "great resource," "add to my wish list"). These titles are indeed far less melancholy than those given to books that suggest "coping techniques" for the owners of dying pets—*Angel Pawprints: Reflections on Loving and Losing a Canine Companion* and *Cold Noses at the Pearly Gates.*

Seeing this is America, there has also been a proliferation, in the past two years, of consumer-oriented books on circumventing the funeral industry by doing your own embalming and coffin making, such as *What Happens When You Die: From Your Last Breath to the First Spadeful.* There is a spate of works that deliberately resort to humor as a healing alternative, such as *Cry Until You Laugh: Comforting Guidance for Coping with Grief* and *The Definitive Guide to Underground Humor: Quaint Quotes About Death, Funny Funeral Home Stories and Hilarious Headstone Epitaphs.* I might note that I found only one book in this cornucopia specifically dedicated to losing fathers (*Longing for Dad: Father Loss and Its Impact),* and that the title that takes the cake is a widow's tale called *I'm Grieving as Fast as I Can.*

Freud would have been particularly appalled by that last title. And after leafing through a few of the above texts, sitting down to his great essay "Mourning and Melancholia" is like hearing the Emerson String Quartet strike up Beethoven's *Grosse Fugue* after suffering through hours of Mantovani's Strings. "Mourning and Melancholia" (the original German title is *Traüer Arbeit,* "The Work of Mourning") is majestic, aloof, austere, uncompromising. It remains the great classic on the issue of bereavement, and if one were forced to sum it up in two words, they would be "Time Out." Mourning, Freud constantly reminds us, is hard, slow, patient *work,* a meticulous process that must be carried out "bit by bit" (that phrase is repeated a half-dozen times), over a far vaster amount of time than twentieth-century society has allotted to any ritual of grief. Crucial to this toil, he tells us, is our careful examination, "piecemeal," as he puts it, of each association, each place, each belonging once shared with the departed (*don't* sell the house the first year, *don't* hasten to put the clothes away, continue to polish his/her silver). Equally essential are those traditional gestures of ritualized grief (memorial services, visits to a grave or commemorative site) that confirm the absence of the dead one. In this slow, long-drawn-out, and gradual work of severance, Freud writes, "each single one of the memories and situations of expectancy which demonstrate the libido's attachment to the lost object is met by the verdict of reality that the object no longer exists. . . . When this work has been accomplished the ego will have succeeded in freeing its libido from the lost object."

What happens if the work of mourning does not proceed on this detailed and stately course, if the enormous energy available for the labor of grief does not find its proper tools or associations? It can become what Freud calls "pathological mourning." Like those spirits of the dead in Greek literature who, if improperly mourned, return to cause malevolent mischief—devastating crops, destroying whole towns—the psychic energies of mourning, if repressed, can wreak grievous harm. They can turn inward into a dangerous process of self-devouring (as when we "eat our hearts out"). They can metamorphose into what we now call depression, a condition for which Freud preferred the more resonant, tradition-laden term *melancholia.* And, most tragically, they can give rise to self-hatred and self-destruction. "The patient represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable, he reproaches himself, vilifies himself and expects to be cast out and punished. . . . This . . . delusion of mainly moral inferiority is completed by sleeplessness and refusal to take nourishment, and . . . by an overcoming of the instinct which compels every living thing to cling to life."

It is not traditional, but very useful, to read Freud and Homer simultaneously. What is most striking in both texts is the sheer energy civilized folk have devoted to rituals of mourning. Here I am in Books 5, 6, and 7 of *The Iliad,* looking in on the clamorous terror of Homeric battle. Lances are being driven clear through eye sockets, livers, and genitals, brains pour out of mouths and severed heads, limb-

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less torsos spin like marbles about the black-blooded earth, men catch their gushing bowels in their hands, crashing "thunderously as towering oaks" onto the blood-soaked ground, and throughout this mayhem there remains on both sides one obsession, one concern: to call an occasional truce that will let each side bury its dead properly. So onto this field of carnage warriors ride, carrying the olive branch, announcing a respite that will enable each camp to carry out its funeral rites. By mutual consent, and for this purpose only, all fighting stops. And on both sides the night is spent in lamentations, in washing and anointing the treasured corpses, in adorning funeral pyres with flowers and drenching them with wine, in honoring with cleansing fire the bones that will eventually be carried back to the warriors' homes. Quite as high and treasurable as wealth and fame, Homer intimates throughout this epic, is the honor of a proper funeral, and life's principal terror is the disgrace of being insufficiently mourned and inadequately buried.

Juxtaposing Freud and Homer over the years, I've come to understand that rituals not only express feelings but mold them and tame them; that mourning rites serve in great part to protect survivors from the excesses of their pain; and that agnosticism does not excuse us from respecting these institutions. For the less a society believes in the existence of a "soul" or "spirit," the more it may need to seek reassurance in specific funeral rites. In the view of some extreme materialists, in fact, whatever "spirit" we possess might rely all the more on a proper handling of our only dead-sure reality—the body. Think of the care lavished for decades on Lenin's embalmed remains in the belief that his psyche would continue to guide the nation as long as his body avoided corruption! Communism may never recover from Vladimir Ilyich's prosaic, unceremonious interment.

Mind you, until recently my own family has never been much good at mourning. There is the case of my stepfather, who bade me get rid of my mother's clothes within a week of her death, sold the house they'd lived in for forty-nine years within the month, and promptly had his second, near-fatal heart attack. There is the case of my husband's aunt, eighty-six-year-old Rosalind, who, after the death of her second husband, committed suicide while staying at a summer hotel with her baby sister, my eighty-four-year-old mother-in-law. "Just send her ashes parcel post!" her sons bellowed on the telephone from New York when queried about funeral arrangements. And there is the case of my own father, the love of my early life, whose only daughter is as late a mourner as can be found.

II

When my father, an officer in the Free French Air Force, was shot down over the Mediterranean in the first summer of World War II—I was nine years old—the news of his death was hidden from me for well over a year. My parents' marriage had been an unhappy one. I had always been under my father's supervision, idolizing my distant mother, a seductive, formidably ambitious woman, alternating warmth and glacial narcissism, with whom I had seldom even shared a meal until I came into her charge. She continued to hide his death from me after we came to America, leading me to believe that he was still alive, "somewhere in the Resistance." The news would be broken to me only by a family acquaintance. I wept solidly for months, and for years to come would follow strangers down the streets for hours under the delusion that my father was still alive, carrying out secret missions. There were precise geographic obstacles to my performing any of those gestures of ritualized grief needed, as Freud puts it, "to confirm the absence of the dead one." The burial site—a vast military cemetery on Gibraltar—lay thousands of miles across the ocean, and was made further unreachable by war.

My mother had been in love for years with a friend of her youth, and remarried soon after my father's death. The suddenness of the wedding, to which I was not invited, may have made my bereavement all the more complex. "The funeral baked meats did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables," says the quintessentially melancholic griever, Hamlet, upon his mother's remarriage. As my new parents banqueted on their long-awaited happiness, I was shunted out of their lives for weeks at a time to

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stay with various friends, warmhearted exiles as impecunious as we, whose only guest facilities were a living room couch. On these makeshift beds I often woke throughout the night shaking with tears, and was barely able to stay awake during the school day that ensued. I remember weeping with particular violence every time one of my birthdays came around, terrified that I was *getting very old.* "I am *decaying* with time"—such was the anxiety that plagued me as I turned twelve, thirteen, fourteen—"I'm getting so old that I can die at any time now." (It's worth noting that it was the theme of "Suicide and Children"—leitmotiv of a psychoanalytic conference held in Vienna in 1912—that first inspired Freud to write "Mourning and Melancholia.") There was no one to whom I could communicate my anxiety; such confessions would have singled me out as "weird" among my peers, and my relationship with my mother was dictated by one delicate strategy—my attempts to win her love by being the cheerfully successful, "attractive" teenager, while constantly reminding her, as an extra bargaining chip, that I could not forgive her earlier neglect.

So in the following American years, my blissfully remarried mother would continue to evade every mention of my father, wipe away every trace of the warrior lying in his military grave thousands of miles across the ocean. Like my stepfather, she geared all activity to goals of social advancement and career, worked prodigiously hard, gambled, laughed, dined and entertained the years away as she sought out the company of the powerful, talented, and wealthy. (The dead are none of these; snobs are seldom good at mourning.) And within a year or two, I began to play her game, I began to forget with her, for it was by far the easier and lazier path. Gorgeous, fabulously successful, renowned for her scathing wit, she had survived the upheavals and famines of the Russian Revolution, a serious case of tuberculosis, an unhappy first marriage, the turmoil of our exodus from occupied France. Throughout this she had avoided all soul-searching and conversation, all mention of and confrontations with the past, and I wanted a piece of her action—her might, her power over others. We were the newly minted family in the new country off to a phenomenal new start. I joined my new parents in their memory-destroying dance, I collaborated like a traitor, I soon transferred to my charming, generous stepfather the affection I had borne for the dead warrior. I came to know the euphoria of burying the ancestral past rather than burying the dead. As for the terrors of my nightly awakenings, by late adolescence they were efficiently repressed, waning apace with most memories of my father, with most conscious interest in his life or death.

III

It is 1948 and I am a freshman at Bryn Mawr, playing the role of Ismene in a college production of Jean Anouilh's *Antigone.* According to what I've just learned in Western Civ, Antigone, custodian of primeval ritual observances, preserver of tribal memory, confronts her uncle Creon, the archetypal male technocrat who, in his obsession with political expediency, is ready to violate any divine law that stands in his way. Against the advice of her accommodating sister, Ismene, she safeguards her dead brother, a rebel against Creon's state, from suffering the greatest dishonor in Greek society—being left "unburied, food for the wild dogs and wheeling vultures." Following the dictates of her conscience and of the Greek religion, she offers her brother the burial rites forbidden him by Creon and suffers the consequences, going to her grave "unsung, unwed." Male *polis* versus female hearth: I have quite grasped these essentials and here I am, a proto-Marxist and militantly secular eighteen-year-old, sympathizing totally with the docile, pragmatic, panicky Ismene, even enjoying moments of approval for the tyrant Creon. Prosperity and survival above all! The orderly society must continue! The forces of progress must prevail! Antigone, in my eyes, is an unintelligibly *archaic* creature, morbid and freakish in her addiction to rites that I find *antiquated, meaningless* (I remember thinking those very words). How I disdain Antigone when she tells me, "You've chosen to live, and I to die." How I relish the moments when I chide my sister for venturing on "hopeless quests," for being "much possessed by death."

Only decades later did I grasp the link be-

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tween Ismene's limp obedience to Creon and my own cowardice about the rites and rights of a dead one lost in war. Only recently have I realized that the role of Ismene, "that beauteous measure of the ordinary," as Kierkegaard describes her, was the one my mother and I had played together for some years. And I would continue to play it for decades to come. A few months after my rendering of Ismene, I received an unsettling letter from a beloved aunt and uncle, my father's favorite cousins, whom I had revisited briefly since the war. They were informing me that my father's body was about to be repatriated, that his remains were due back at the ancestral vault in Brittany the following July, that our family was gathering for the final burial, that everyone, of course, expected me to come. It was a few years after the war's end; I was eighteen years old. I remember a sense of being assaulted, of being threatened in some very private space that I now realize was the site of an inchoate, deeply sunken grief: how dare they order me to cross the ocean and appear on such and such a day for an abstract and tedious family duty! I was my mother's child, I remember thinking those very words: *tedious, abstract.*

So even though I fully planned to be in France that summer, I wrote back to my aunt telling her not to expect me; I crassly lied and said I could not leave the States that year. "Thank you for letting me know, there's no way I can make it, I'm so glad you'll be there." By which I meant, thanks for minding my business, just take care of it without me. Don't bother me with Memory, I was also saying, echoing my mother. I, too, was burying a parent through the slothful route of a postal service.

IV

Unlike Freud, who assigns to the work of mourning an evenly calibrated, methodical, almost industrial pace, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross divides the process of accepting death, which can be applied as well to the course of grief, into four often tumultuous stages: 1) denial ("No, not me"); 2) rage and anger ("Why me?"); 3) bargaining ("Yes, me, but . . . "); 4) depression ("Yes, me"); 5) acceptance of death ("It's okay, my own time is close"). Kübler-Ross's schema is not that different from the Judaic view of the mourning process, which recognizes the following four phases: 1) three days of deep grief, often ritualized through the *kriyah* or rending of clothes, symbol of the rage and internal tearing asunder that survivors often feel upon their loss; 2) seven days of mourning—"sitting *shivah*"—during which relatives and acquaintances visit the mourners, who are thus able to retell and relive their memories of the deceased and share their emotions; 3) thirty days of gradual readjustment; 4) eleven months of remembrance and healing.

According to these approaches, I seem to have been one of those pathological Hamletian mourners who spend decades in a folly of stage one. For a few years in my twenties I was settled in Paris, with a job as a journalist. I knew only too well the exact site of my father's tomb at his family's vault in Brittany, but did not once return to visit it. I saw my father's closest friend and confidant, Pierre F, one of the dearest persons of my childhood, and changed the subject whenever he began to speak of his dead comrade. I turned away from the charming, accomplished woman who I knew had been my father's lover for several pre-war years, and I never called either one of his companions during the several visits I made to France in the following fifteen years. When visiting with my aunt and uncle, subtle, prescient beings who had grasped the nature of my reticence and knew never to press me on the issue of my father, I prattled on about politics, my Paris men and jobs, and later my marriage, my two children.

But many of us are thrust out of that first stage of rage and denial by the approach of middle age, that often cataclysmic time of reassessment which can readily unclench a flood of new emotions about memory and grief. In the spring of 1970, almost thirty years after my father's death, I suddenly felt an urgent, unprecedented need to learn all there was to know about him, craved every shred of information about his character, his idiosyncrasies, the nature of his fate. When I went to Paris that year, I asked my uncle to help me look up both of my father's only surviving friends. The beautiful woman had just died the previous year. Pierre F was suffering from terminal can-

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cer, and a month after I'd returned to the United States I received a note from my uncle telling me that Pierre had died. I'd arrived at the treasures—the repositories of much of the information I was seeking—a few months too late.

In the following years, my regret and guilt, my long-repressed tenderness for these two links to my childhood, turned into a new wave of rage and self-hatred, as did every aspect of my long cowardice concerning my father's memory. If I followed Kübler-Ross, I would say that, like other grievers disadvantaged by history or circumstance, I jumbled the three middle stages of mourning—anger, bargaining, depression—into one dangerously turbulent phase. The plight of such survivors is described in a recently published volume of my Bereavement Lit collection, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief,* which deals with the perilous belated syndromes caused by the loss of loved ones "not known to be alive or dead," "missing in action, lost due to immigration or adoption." Such mourners can relive the self-reproaching depression they suffered in their youth, such as those fits of anxiety I knew as a child when I had woken, weeping, in near-strangers' living rooms. ("Ambiguous loss," I read in the book just cited, "is unique in that the trauma goes on and on . . . [and] alternates between hope and hopelessness.") Much of life's meaning can be threatened. There can be impulses to self-destruction. "My heart was utterly darkened," Saint Augustine wrote as he relived the death of a boyhood friend. "I became a great riddle to myself, and asked my soul, *why she was so sad, and why she disquieted me sorely;* but she knew not what to answer me."

I sought help. It was suggested that I should, at long last, visit my father's grave.

During an extended stay with my aunt, whom I finally encouraged, indeed constantly exhorted, to share every crucial and trivial detail she remembered about our mutual lost love—be it his generosity, his expertise in tennis and Oriental art, or his heroism in war—I finally acquired the courage to return to the ancestral vault where he is buried. There is a passage in my novel *Lovers and Tyrants* in which I describe the first visit of my protagonist, Stephanie, to her (my) father's tomb:

> I kneel down on the sealing stone which stands between me and the dead, that separates his body from mine. . . . And then suddenly my liberation comes. I am free now, kneeling on the stone, suddenly free and shaking, my head resting against the rusty metal handle that could be lifted for our reunion. I weep, I shake, I pound at the floor with my head, I kick it, I beat it with my hands. . . . He is there, he is there, he is there. Above all else he is now allowed to live in my memory, totally restored and whole now, as if resurrected, the reality of his death accepted, faced.

I may have been a bit optimistic in that passage. But I do know that I've rejected Ismene and come close to embracing Antigone. I've come to understand that Creon's refusal to accept an equipoise between the rights of the living and those of the dead—a balance essential to our psychic survival—is what brings on his own destruction.

I've also come to know that healthy mourning has to do with relearning reality; that we must cease to desire the loved ones' return and must re-create a new psychic space in which we continue to love them in absence and separation. Above all, I now realize that we can only continue to propagate their values, their lives' meanings, by some dynamic interaction with the story of their lives, that information is our most valuable treasure, that we may have to learn those life narratives before we can begin the proper work of grief.

So go for it! I say to my students when they inform me that they want to tape the recollections of a grandmother, a great-granduncle, their own guardians of tribal memory. Go for it now, or you may get there too late, as I did. Do it for me.

V

It is June 2000, and there's so much to do at Mother's grave! I must prune the rhododendrons, give them a particularly good feeding after this arduous winter, perhaps put in some new evergreens on either side of the tombstone that surmounts her ashes and bears her name and dates—Tatiana Iakovleva du Plessix Liberman, 1906–1991. She lies half a

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mile from my house as the bird flies, less than a mile on foot. In the proper weather I can even walk a few hundred yards down my road and cut across a wide swath of fields, and there she is under a bed of myrtle, at the northwest end of my village cemetery. My husband and I chose this plot for our entire family a few decades ago, I have been easy, familiar with death ever since my near breakdown at my father's tomb. Mother had gone in first, waiting for us, and now, as of the past winter, my cherished stepfather's name and dates are engraved below hers. After I've pruned and fed the rhodies I must weed the myrtle, a hellish task to get at the lawn grass without breaking the delicate roots—I am possessive, tidy if not narcissistic about Mother's grave, as she was with her own appearance in life. I feel guilty, for instance, about the current sparseness of the foliage on the rhodies; I failed to wrap them in burlap last fall, as I had in previous years, to shelter them from our icy winters. It had been a hellish November, with my dearest friend, Ethel C, dying just four days before my stepfather, and as I moved from mourning to mourning I kept forgetting the burlap each time I went to visit Mother. . . . Beyond my frequent horticultural checks, and birthdays and Christmases, I come to see her on every important occasion of the year—before taking a trip abroad, for instance, as if to get her blessing, and when a new grandchild is born, to share the joy, and upon crises, to glean counsel. . . . I suppose that having her near me, visitable upon a moment's whim, is a way of taming her, of having her under my control. For by the time I reached adulthood she had tried to make up for the past with invasive possessiveness, generosity. I had fought back, guarding my frontiers at every step, deviously continuing to charm her while reminding her that I'd never quite forgiven her theft and botching of my father's memory. A decade ago, when she started shuttling back and forth to the hospital and I knew she had no great time left, I started visiting her obsessively, regretting—too late, of course, it is always too late—that I had not started earlier to give and to forgive. She was deeply pleased, but continued to take pleasure in plying her sarcasm. "You know, everyone loves me except you," she once announced, sitting up from her pillows as if she were serving for the match. "You," she said, pointing her long clawed finger, "are merely *afraid* of me." She fell back on her bed. "Just teasing," she added with a grin of sadistic satisfaction. Take that. She died a few weeks later. I sat with her in the intensive care unit a few hours before her end, pressing my face upon hers, begging her forgiveness and outpouring mine, for whatever it was worth. What a model you have been, after all, I told her. What force and shrewdness and power of survival you passed on to me, despite your cowardice. Thank you, my love, I'll never cease to thank you. What pride I took, following her death, in doing all that my stepfather's own illness disabled him from doing—funeral home, newspapers, church and flowers, hosting a wake for hundreds of guests. I had gone through every stage of filial struggle with her—wrath, rebellion, reconciliation, acceptance—and now at last I knew the luxury of properly mourning a parent. As my family and I passed by her open coffin at the Russian Orthodox church service, I felt—beyond my immense sorrow, that brutal sense of physical severance most deeply suffered by daughters—something that resembled a kind of triumph: dear God, I've survived her. And now that her grave is totally under my control, she is my docile little girl, sandstone-soft, every memory of her to be sculpted and honed according to my whims. I can erase the sites of darkness and retain only the very best of her—the scathing intelligence, the rage to live, the acts of extravagant kindness. There's nothing like a grave, particularly if your life was almost botched for lack of one. Now the guardians are all gone, I reflect as I drastically prune the rhododendrons back in hopes that they'll regrow, they're all gone, and I'm the sole custodian, the weight of memory and information is all on me, to share or to withhold, I'm finally in charge.

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Perhaps the most remarkable thing the sexes have in common is that they bother to marry at all. Marriage is a cultural universal; it predominates in every society in the world.

—HELEN FISHER,
The Anatomy of Love, *1992*

Next, when they had got themselves huts and skins and fire and woman mated with man moved into one [house, and the laws of wedlock] became known, and they saw offspring born of them, then first the human race began to grow soft. For the fire saw to it that their shivering bodies were less able to endure cold under the canopy of heaven, and Venus sapped their strength, and children easily broke their parents' proud spirit by coaxings.

—LUCRETIUS,
De Rerum Natura, *c. 50 B.C.*

COMMONPLACE BOOK

Marriage

COLLECTED BY
ANDRÉ BERNARD

Alypius was in no sense overcome by lust for pleasure like mine; what lured him toward a tentative desire for marriage was curiosity. Neither of us considered, except feebly, what the glory of wedlock could be in terms of guiding the course of a marriage and bringing up children. It was my habitual attempt to sate an insatiable concupiscence that for the most part savagely tormented me and held me captive, while for him it was wonder that dragged him along toward captivity. Such was our condition until you, O Most High, who forsake not our clay, mercifully came to aid our misery in marvelous, hidden ways.

—ST. AUGUSTINE,
The Confessions, *Book VI, c. 400 A.D.*

A successful marriage represents the triumph of will over the immediate needs of the moment.

—W. H. AUDEN,
letter to Robert Lederer, May 29, 1969

If well-formed and rightly taken, there is not a finer state [than marriage] in human society. Though we cannot live without it, yet we do nothing but decry it. We see the same with bird-cages: the birds outside despair to get in and those within despair to get out.

—MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE,
Upon Some Verses of Virgil
Essays, Book III, *1588*

In the bliss of our coming together, which had been brought about by pure chance and in which, since nothing had been premeditated, we could boast of nothing and accuse ourselves of nothing, we spent several minutes unable to speak. The harmony between us was such that our mouths only gave and received kisses. But we still had nothing to say to each other when, after our share of kisses, we grew serious and remained in a state of inactivity which would have made us doubt we were alive if it had continued. It was only momentary. Nature and love, in perfect harmony, ended the shameful suspense by a single impulse, and we surrendered to each other. Cristina is the first to break the silence, by saying, with the most perfect tranquillity and sweetness, "What have we done?"

"We have married each other."

—GIACOMO CASANOVA,
History of My Life, *1797*

No later than the next day I decided to make Cristina happy without marrying her. I had had the idea when I still loved her more than myself. After I enjoyed her, the scales had swung to my side so far that my self-love proved to outweigh the love her charms had inspired in me. I could not bring myself, by marrying, to give up all the hopes which depended on my remaining in my state of freedom.

—CASANOVA,
Ibid.

Finally he stood his head on the table and rendered the dance figures with his feet in the air. Cleisthenes, during the first and second phase of this dancing, restrained himself—though he loathed that Hippoclides should become his son-in-law, thanks to his daring and

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lewdness—because he did not wish to make a public outburst against Hippoclides. But when he saw the feet in the air, rendering the dance figures, he could stand it no more and said, "Son of Tisander, you have danced—danced away your marriage!" Then Hippoclides retorted, "Not a jot cares Hippoclides." From this happening the byword has arisen.

—HERODOTUS,
VI, *c. 443 B.C.*

But ill or not, I NEVER NEVER spent such an evening!!! My DEAREST DEAREST DEAR Albert sat on a footstool by my side, & his excessive love & affection gave me feelings of heavenly love & happiness, I never could have *hoped* to have felt before! He clasped me in his arms, and we kissed each other again and again! His beauty, his sweetness and gentleness—really how can I ever be thankful enough to have such a *Husband!*

—QUEEN VICTORIA,
Journal, *February 10, 1840,*
on spending her wedding night prostrated
on a sofa with a severe headache

It was much remarked that she and Prince Albert were up very early on Tuesday morning walking about, which is very contrary to her former habits. Strange that a bridal night should be so short; and I told Lady Palmerston that this was not the way to provide us with a Prince of Wales.

—CHARLES GREVILLE,
The Greville Memoirs, *IV, February 1840*

In my home life I am very happy and contented, but the difficulty of filling my place with proper dignity is that I am only the husband, and not the master of the house.

—PRINCE ALBERT,
letter to Prince William of Lowenstein, May 1840

There is, indeed, nothing that so much seduces reason from vigilance, as the thought of passing life with an agreeable woman.

—SAMUEL JOHNSON,
letter, December 21, 1762

"Ah, *ces américains,*" sighed a Follies girl one evening. "*Quels hommes!* They are such good bad boys. They wish to spend the night, even the weekend." She went on to explain how this complicated the economic structure of one in her profession. She was used, in the case of other foreigners, to a nightly transference of paid affections as neatly maneuvered as the changing of partners at a square dance. "These Americans are born to marry. . . ."

—JAMES THURBER,
"The First Time I Saw Paris," *April 1957*

Contrary to popular belief, passed down through the obfuscations of mothers and grandmothers, ladies have always initiated marriage proposals or had others do so on their behalf. Miss Manners only hopes that ladies who perform the service for themselves these days will observe the proprieties of proposals that gentlemen have long been expected to follow. The proper form for a proposal of marriage is not "It's about time we started talking seriously." It is not "Why aren't you willing to make a permanent commitment?" It is not "I don't care, but it would mean a lot to my parents if we got married, and I just want them to stop hassling me." It is not "My biological clock is ticking away." It is not "Aren't you ever going to be ready to take responsibility?" The proper form for a proposal of marriage is, "I love you madly, I can't live without you. Will you marry me?"

—JUDITH MARTIN,
Miss Manners' Guide to Rearing
Perfect Children, *1980*

A young woman down in the country had taken it into her head that she would like to marry me. The invitation had come from her, and I had lacked the pluck to give it a decided negative; but I had left the house within half an hour, going away without my dinner and had never returned to it.

ANTHONY TROLLOPE,
An Autobiography, *1883*

There is a time for all things—except Marriage my dear.

THOMAS CHATTERTON,
letter to an admirer, April 1770

A man in love is incomplete until he has married. Then he's finished.

—ZSA ZSA GABOR,
Newsweek, *March 12, 1960*

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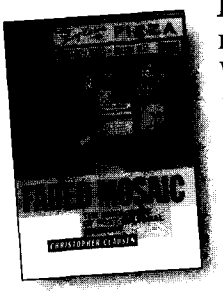

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The Electronic Book

D. T. MAX

Here are two versions of the future. (A) It's July 2020, and after a long day at work, Citizen X is looking forward to reading the new Updike on the subway. He settles into his seat and pulls out a sheet of paper thickly coated with plastic. In the morning he read the *Times* on it. Now the Knopf colophon, a borzoi, looks up and barks. The Gothic font has changed to Jansen, Updike's favorite from the days of printed books. Updike proves in great form. *Bech, Again?* is a treat. When a voluptuous North Korean translator rebuffs the arthritic but still sexually driven Bech, X laughs. "Reminds me of that Bulgarian poetess in the first one—what was her name?" he says. Chapter three of *Bech: An E-Book* presents itself in response to X's voice.

(B) It's July 2020, and after a long day of work, Citizen X is looking forward to reading the new Updike on the subway. He takes a seat, pulls out the Knopf hardback, settles back, opens the book, thumbs the ragged edges of the pages, and starts reading . . .

Version (A) sounds more far-fetched than version (B). You may also find it exciting—or disheartening, as John Updike did when I described it to him over the phone. But the technology required to make the scenario plausible—except maybe the part about getting a seat on the subway—is nearly here. Home computers can now store the equivalent of ten thousand books. Voice-recognition software and hologram technology are on the market. The most futuristic aspect of (A), rewritable ink, will be available soon. Two companies, Xerox and E Ink, which is owned in part by the Hearst Corporation and Motorola, are manufacturing early

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models of a paperlike plastic sheet whose tiny black capsules can be formed and reformed into letters and symbols. An electric impulse or radio wave alters the configuration. Eventually, you'll be able to read a different book on the same sheet of paper week after week.

When that day comes, what will we mean by knowledge? What is a culture if the information that forms it never stands still? Since the development of the codex in roughly 400 A.D., we have come to live with an implicit hierarchy of information, with books at the top. They are our final record. First we talk about an idea, then we assay it in newspapers, magazines, television, and radio, and finally we decide whether it merits permanent remembrance. If so, it finds its way into a book.

The primacy of the book follows naturally from its form. It has a protective shell that keeps dust and sunlight off the fragile printed pages, allowing the words within to be legible for centuries. This primacy will disappear when the book becomes as evanescent as an image on a TV screen. Without its physical advantages, how long will the book's authority persist, and what, in turn—if anything—will take its place? Probably nothing, because nothing will ever again have the physical properties to do so. This absence will in turn change our mental lives. The codex was proof (some would say misleading evidence) that there were ideas that lasted, that deserved special respect. The invention of the e-book will push us to the reverse conclusion—that knowledge is in perpetual flux. It will make relativists of us all. Looked at this way, the e-book may represent an unprecedented and even dangerous innovation. It is not merely the latest gizmo thrown off by the forces that, over the last twenty-five years, have been separating words from paper: word processors, electronic dictionaries, CD-ROMs, the Web. Unlike these, the e-book will knock a key strut out from under us all.

E-books have not yet come of age. Their cultural importance stands at least twenty years off, at the time of Citizen X's subway ride. But no one is going to wait. Despite names like the Rocket eBook, the SoftBook, the Everybook, the Glassbook, and the Librius Millennium Reader, the first generation of electronic books has less in common with Citizen X's e-book than with the 1980s laptop he might keep in his den as a curiosity. The dominant design is a plastic rectangular box with a gray-scale or black-and-white screen, displaying those familiar pop-up windows. The Rocket eBook, made by NuvoMedia, debuted with enough memory for only four thousand pages; its current capacity of sixteen thousand is hardly state-of-the-art. Still, the new e-books are the first stand-alone electronic reading devices that both the computer industry and publishers are backing. They offer the reader the chance to download new bestsellers and literary novels from an on-line bookstore, read them, and then save or erase them. Consumers seem to like the idea, especially since the price has fallen from $499 to $269 and will certainly go lower. Rocket eBook titles, which can be purchased at various bookselling Web sites,

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cost about the same as a discounted hardcover, between $20 and $30. When I began this article, the top e-book sellers were Scott Turow's *Personal Injuries* and Dan Brown's *Digital Fortress,* a Tom Clancy–type thriller about the National Security Agency. But that was no more meaningful than the baseball standings would be one month into the season. Last March, a new Stephen King novella, *Riding the Bullet,* outsold these books in the blink of an eye, with an estimated 400,000 ordered in the first two days (although "sold" may be the wrong word, since some copies were $2.50, some were free, and others represented repeated attempts to contact the overloaded servers to order the book). The market is still inventing itself. Trade publishers estimate that within a few years, 10 percent of all books will be sold to be read on electronic devices. The e-book makers and software designers—especially Microsoft, which is leading the e-book effort—hope for far more. They insist they will have 90 percent of the entire market by the time Citizen X gets his souped-up device.

The analogy that believers tend to invoke is that of the automobile and the horse. The e-book will do the heavy work of conveying information and entertaining us while the book retreats to the status of a collectible, ideal for facsimile editions and high-quality art books. Will it really happen this way? Are these the last days of the Gutenberg era? It's hard to take so seriously something that doesn't even have an agreed-upon spelling yet: e-book, Ebook, ebook, and eBook are all in use. But the point is that it is coming, sooner rather than later, and that it is meant to supersede the book.

It's obvious to most of us that the book as a form has great virtue. The paper, the ink, the cover, what Updike called "the charming little clothy box of the thing"—we understand without having it pointed out how much these add to the experience of reading. No congregation will ever celebrate the Torah in paperback. This is not something e-book makers care about. They dismiss such observations with the buzz phrase "books as furniture." They admire books for technical reasons, though: books never crash. They don't weigh much and don't need electricity. Several years ago, I took down a first edition of *Titus Andronicus,* dated 1594, from a shelf in the Folger Shakespeare Library, sat in a chair, and read it. It was a small book, in the trim size known as quarto, with a library rebinding to protect the pages and a little stick-em with the word UNIQUE attached to its spine. It is the only one in existence, and I was sitting there reading it. For a moment, Shakespeare and I were—perhaps even literally—connected. Consider the computer disk. Its life span may be fifteen years—or fifty. No one knows. Either way you'll need to have the right computer around. My college application essay is on an odd-sized disk that worked in the Wang word processors that dominated the office market in the late seventies. I don't know anyone whose computer could read it even if it were still extractable. "Electronic storage" appears to be an oxymoron.

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The book may be durable, but it has one big shortcoming: it is not connected to anything else. Books are not wired. When you want to read a book, you go to the bookstore or pick up the phone or log onto Amazon.com and order it. However you get it, the book must come to occupy the same physical space as you do. That movement, that effort—my atoms needing to interface with a book's atoms—all this seems almost immoral to a geek, like kludgy code or a slow processor. Books are roadside diners in the era of McDonald's.

The computer has supplanted the calculator, the typewriter, and, to some extent, the fax machine; soon, perhaps, it will replace or merge with the telephone, the television, the compact disc player, and the VCR. Newspapers, magazines, textbooks, and reference works are already becoming part of the digital-information stream. The educational and environmental benefits seem to me too significant to reject out of nostalgia or anxiety. But the narrative book is a separate case. Its influence on the way we reason, imagine, and invent is incalculable. I can't imagine the novel without the book, nor the biography. Shouldn't the book be preserved as a kind of cultural safety net, to remind us that, whatever we are thinking today, we thought something different yesterday? Why not give the book an exemption from computer culture, make it the first UNESCO World Heritage Technology? Or why not view the e-book as a complement to rather than a replacement for the printed book—the equivalent of an audio book? John Warnock, chairman of the board of Adobe, explained to me why such an entente was unlikely. His company occupies a midpoint between computer and print culture. Its primary products are the typefaces that give computer printouts an analog look. They make the unfamiliar familiar. "The book is the one thing computer people haven't been able to replace," Warnock said. "They may look at it and think, if we can do this, we're done."

In 1994, when I first reported on the proposed electronic-book industry, I drank a lot of cappuccino with ponytailed men who quoted Marshall McLuhan. That was a more interesting time in e-book history. The industry's foremost articulator was Louis Rossetto, the cofounder of *Wired,* who worked in a neighborhood of San Francisco called Multimedia Gulch. As I went into his office, his young, lively staff watched me with faces that seemed to say: another print guy making the pilgrimage. Rossetto wanted to talk about what was wrong with print culture. He thought we could do better than Gutenberg. Print culture had replaced the hand-copied manuscript with a bloodless mass-produced object, the book. Knowledge became not something to create but something to absorb. Books taught us to stay in line. On-line media, on the other hand, would be at once liberating and orderly, like an acid trip with a great index.

I loved this kind of talk, but its moment was long over by the fall of

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1998, when the first Electronic Book Conference was held. On a drizzly October day I joined nearly four hundred e-book manufacturers, software designers, venture capitalists, and publishers at the National Institute of Standards and Technology in Gaithersburg, Maryland. People mentioned Rossetto, who had left *Wired* to become a consultant, with a shake of the head. "Information may want to be free," said Dick Brass, a vice president of technology development at Microsoft who was the conference's keynote speaker, "but authors happen to want to be paid." Rossetto's assistant called to tell me that e-books didn't interest his boss because they weren't innovative enough. It didn't matter. The idea was no longer whether to build, but what tools to use. Microsoft, Sony, Hitachi, and Sharp held informal meetings outside the auditorium with the start-up e-book companies, who were looking for investors. One participant sent an e-mail to an electronic-books newsgroup calling the conference "the e-book Woodstock," but it reminded me more of Yalta.

Dick Brass is an affable, deep-voiced, middle-aged man who was a *Daily News* features editor and TV restaurant critic until he quit to develop the first dictionary-based electronic spell checker, which came out in 1981. He is also an old friend of Bill Gates, who persuaded him to come out of early retirement to direct Microsoft's e-book efforts. I doubt he needs the work; perhaps that is why he's so good at it. If I felt upset at the idea of Microsoft and Random House in the same room, I had only to look at Brass, with his walrus mustache and crumpled gray suit, to calm down. He chose to open the 1998 conference, interestingly, by recounting the failed history of the electronic book, dating back to a primitive ancestor called a "memex" that was conceived at MIT shortly after World War II, though never constructed. His point was that the technology kept improving, but the business environment hadn't. Hardware makers, publishers, and software makers viewed one another as competitors. This time around, Microsoft would not try to create the content. Publishers in turn should not try to manufacture the product, as they had in the mid-nineties with CD-ROMS. Gates e-mailed me a similar message. He wrote, "We're working with a whole group of companies—publishers such as HarperCollins, Simon & Schuster and Bertelsmann, e-book pioneers like EveryBook, Glassbook, Librius, NuvoMedia, and SoftBook, and on-line booksellers such as barnesandnoble.com. . . . To make e-books a reality, the industry needs to avoid the kind of VHS v Betamax war that took place in the VCR market. . . . [Otherwise] the business won't take off—people will just keep reading paper books."

The conference ended. A year passed. Some people bought e-books and read them on the plane or in bed while their husbands slept. Far more heard about them. Microsoft did a random survey and found that 50 percent of three thousand people polled at random knew

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what an e-book was. This was amazing, if unclear. What had they *heard* about e-books? Maybe that they were clunky devices with poor screens?

We regrouped in Gaithersburg for a second conference. Same drizzly fall weather; same programmers, publishers, and venture capitalists; same gray suit, rep tie, and Patagonia parka on Dick Brass. But this time there was a lot less win-win talk. This was because the publishers had been bad. They had spent the past year cooperating more in appearance than in reality, thinking they could slip one by the geeks. They had licensed everything but their very top sellers—their Danielle Steeles and Tom Clancys. They had kept their number three and number four hitters on the bench. Who could blame them? They had a lot to think about and they were still thinking. They didn't know if they should stick with what they knew—printed books—or become electronic publishers themselves and leave paper and print behind. They worried if by doing business with electronic-book manufacturers they were selling their executioner the rope. The senior financial officer of one publisher did a back-of-the-envelope calculation for me and came up with an annual $20 million rise in the industry's profitability, assuming 10 percent of books are sold electronically at current prices. He was pleased. But he was worried, too. If a publishing house is nothing more than an editor with a modem and a techie in the back, what's to keep literary agents from licensing their clients' work directly? International Creative Management Editions Presents Toni Morrison? Or, more likely, Microsoft Presents John Grisham Editions? Consequently, publishers temporized. They did not want to make a costly mistake.

At E-Books II, Brass gave them something new to think about. Microsoft's antitrust problems were no longer on the front page, though they would return a few months later with a vengeance. This time Brass did a PowerPoint slide presentation that forecast the end of books. He also presented a piece of software called the Microsoft Reader that works on laptops and desktop computers and makes whatever is displayed look like a printed page. Other programmers laughed at Microsoft Reader. They said the technology, which was still in its pre-pre-release version, was derived from an old Apple project (Microsoft disputed this). In either case, the result was not too bad. Most important, it will be available for free at the Microsoft Web site, maybe late this summer. There are already millions of computers that run Windows. Soon there will be millions of computers that have Microsoft Reader. There are also a lot of scanners. To connect the dots, all Brass had to do was say "MP3." MP3 is software that allows you to download music quickly from the Web. Between E-Books I and II, millions of fans downloaded rock songs and paid nothing. They had a great time. On my way to the conference I happened to share a taxi with an MP3 consultant from Texas on her way to a music convention in New York City. She said the music industry estimated that MP3

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had cost them $1 billion in revenues. There were lawsuits as a result, but also a rush to find a marketing solution. Previously the music companies had been like publishers, temporizing. She thought they'd all reach a deal this time around. That was the not-so-subtle point of Brass's presentation, too. You could scan a book in and read it on Microsoft Reader whether the publisher helped or not. "We need to foster habits of honest purchase," he said, "before the pirates move in."

There are other snares for publishers. Perhaps the most radical figure at the conferences was Richard Curtis, the only literary agent to attend. At the first conference Curtis was an onlooker. By the second he was a speaker. He is a scholarly-looking sixty-three-year-old—glasses, salt-and-pepper beard—who runs his agency out of a suite of offices off Third Avenue. He was at the conventions to represent E-Rights.com, a separate company he has started, which offers e-book makers a new service. For a small fee, it will secure electronic rights and convert text to electronic code. In other words, it will eliminate the publisher.

This is possible because most publishing contracts, especially those written before the mid-nineties, do not contain an explicit grant of electronic rights. "Who has the electronic rights to *As I Lay Dying?* Nobody knows," says Susan Ralston, a Knopf executive who is the division's liaison with electronic publishers. Curtis estimates that there are more than a million titles out of print. Who winds up with their electronic rights depends on who has the most energy, wields the most legal clout, and moves the fastest. We can expect "a near future of warfare between publishers and authors over the control of rights," says Curtis.

Such proclamations are, at the very least, premature. Now that it is clear there is money to be made, Brass and the publishers have begun to reach an accommodation. America will not be denied John Grisham on e-books. I went to a small dim sum luncheon hosted by Microsoft during E-Books II that seemed a good reflection of the industry. At first Brass controlled the lazy Susan. Only he recognized the dishes (his training as a restaurant reviewer), and he ate exactly what he wanted. Carol Risher, the publishers' representative, began slowly, but soon she got into the dumplings too. Curtis was so glad to be at the table that he barely got his chopsticks out.

There were no authors at that lunch table. That seemed right, too. Except for genre writers like King, they have been slow to see the importance of what is happening. One of the first titles available on the Rocket eBook was Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha.* He said he wasn't sure how his novel had come to be chosen. His agent referred me to Knopf, where Susan Ralston said that a wish list of Knopf titles had come from Rocket, ranging from the novels of Toni Morrison to *Red Blood and Black Ink,* a history of journalism in the Old West. ("I think they thought it was a Burt Lancaster movie," Ralston says.) Golden happened to be

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one of the few on the list for whom the rights situation appeared clear, and his agent was willing to give it a try. Golden said he did not mind the experience of being a guinea pig, although he'd read his book so often in galleys he skipped the electronic version.

John Updike—who, when I'd asked him, had seemed so unenthusiastic about electronic books—said if the public wanted *Bech: An E-Book*, he would say yes. "I don't think the author should stand in the way of his readers," he said. A few writers are even trying to celebrate the e-book as a new arrival in the literary family. When the Rocket eBook was launched at the Union Square Barnes & Noble in New York City in 1998, Robert Pinsky, the Poet Laureate, commemorated the occasion by reading a poem, "The Haunted Ruin":

> This too smells of the body, its heated
> Polymers smell of breast milk
> And worry-sweat.
> Hum of so many cycles in current, voltage
> Of the past. Sing, wires. Feel, hand. Eyes,
> Watch and form
> Legs and bellies of characters . . .

On a train trip from Washington back to New York, I finally got my chance to try the new e-books for myself. The Glassbook turned out to be just a rumor (and would ultimately reach the market as reading software). The Everybook existed only as a cardboard mock-up. I took this as a Magrittian allusion. *Ceci n'est pas un livre.* When produced, it will have facing screens that sound unsuitable for a train. Perhaps for the yacht . . .

But I had a Rocket eBook and a SoftBook in my bag. I wanted to experience the world as it would be if, as some participants at the conference predicted, in thirty years there were no more printed books. The first thing I realized was that my luggage was incredibly light. The second was that the future is now. This was a Friday afternoon Metroliner. Everyone was hunting and pecking and being beeped at and staring at a green screen. Why should I, just because I wanted to read, be exempt from this unhappiness? I pulled my Rocket eBook, the size of a thick trade paperback, from its Euro-styled leatherette holder. I pressed the "on" button. By touching a picture of a row of little books, I was able to call up *Memoirs of a Geisha*, a book I had wanted to read for some time. Several things impressed me. The backlighting was warm and soft. It didn't remind me of paper, but it didn't get in the way, either. I could read with one hand, leaving the other free. (I thought of the old saw that pornography is the engine of technology.) Using the page-turning button, I clicked nicely through the story. But it wasn't capturing my attention. Chiyo's attempts

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to find her sister bored me. It may have been the writing, but maybe my receptors were failing to find whatever part of books makes them books. I think it was all that glass. Reading the story was like watching a fish in an aquarium tank. I wanted to swim with it.

So I clicked again on the bookshelf picture and switched to Michael Wolff's *Burn Rate,* an account of venture capitalists' eagerness to finance anything with the word *cyber* in it. I thought it was cocky of the Rocket eBook (and the SoftBook) to stock it. I was having a better time now. *Burn Rate* was lighter going, closer to a magazine article in tone. It was divided into anecdotes, which helped. Whatever inside me had resisted *Memoirs of a Geisha* gave in. Soon I wasn't even noticing the clicks of the page turner. The Rocket eBook comes with a plastic stylus to make notes on screen, but when it dropped under my seat I didn't pick it up.

As the train reached Philadelphia, I put down the Rocket eBook—it saved my place automatically—and pulled out the SoftBook. If the Rocket eBook is low tech, the SoftBook is no tech. You open the leather cover and the screen turns on, like those old close-and-play children's phonographs in reverse. My copy came preloaded with "content." (The SoftBook is designed to be an electronic "briefing" tool—to handle documents, corporate information, and other business essentials, as well as books. This, along with electronic textbooks, is where many analysts think the most money is to be made.) I began reading a *Times* profile of Joseph Jacobson, the MIT professor who had patented one of the technologies for electronic ink, the infinitely rewritable medium of Citizen X's e-book. Jacobson told the *Times* of his ambition: to create "the last book." It would hold everything in the Library of Congress and be more compact than the *Joy of Cooking.* We were to expect it soon.

I wanted new books to read, fresh blood. Even if John Grisham isn't yet on e-books, a lot else is. What's available is like an American Cultural Studies reading list: Stephen King, George Bush's *All the Best,* Andrew Morton's *Monica's Story,* Michael Cunningham's *The Hours,* Victoria Gotti's *The Senator's Daughters,* plus lots of science fiction and romance. Rocket eBook and SoftBook (which have recently merged under the ownership of Gemstar, the inventor of a device to help you program your VCR) each has more than a thousand copyrighted titles. To download a SoftBook title, you don't need a computer. You plug a telephone line into your device and dial directly into the SoftBook Bookstore. You click on the books that you want, and before you know it, they're inside your SoftBook. Somewhere a little elf charges your credit card. When I tried it, the system failed. The Rocket eBook connects to your computer (you have to have a fast modem and "Windows 95 or better," as they say, to make it work), which connects to the Internet. I clicked on a special section of Barnesandnoble.com set aside for Rocket eBook customers. It didn't quite work either.

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Then my Rocket eBook froze. A Rocket employee (the elf herself?) took a cab up from Chelsea and lent me hers, an experience the average consumer is not likely to have. The eBook was still "unable to install title." *Memoirs of a Geisha* and *Burn Rate,* which came pre-loaded, were mysteriously deleted in the process. So I booted up my AOL account and found the Barnes & Noble Web site, where I ordered a replacement for Golden's book. I received a message to download it from a memorable Web address: http://www.rocket-ebook.com/cgi-bin/customer/purchase_pickup?purchase_id=1400&auth=27ppp12a. The bill came with a two-dollar charge for gift wrapping, which, as I protested in an e-mail to customer service, was a metaphysical impossibility. None of this bothered me, really. James Sachs, the SoftBook chairman, had told people candidly at the 1998 conference that the current model of the SoftBook was "the worst we'll ever make." I accept that. Between E-Books I and II, Hitachi found a way to put ten thousand books on a single chip. Technology will not be the problem.

What I liked less was the registration process. My electronic book had a number. My name was attached to it, and so was a password. I felt as if I were taking money out of the bank, not shopping for a book. I asked both Software and Rocket eBook executives if there was a way to shop without registering. They did not understand the question. When you buy software, after all, you register. This is important for an industry where so much software is bootlegged. Printed books have been immune to this problem. Who wants to stand in front of a photocopy machine for several hours to save twenty-five dollars? But digital text is compact; you can pirate it in seconds. In late 1998, I sat in on a meeting between Brass and a Simon & Schuster executive in which Brass brought up the piracy issue. The executive said that book readers were different, that they would not steal books. We all paused to look at a shelf of *Star Trek* paperbacks, a series that has earned Simon & Schuster tens of millions of dollars. Would such books really survive the predations of teenage pirates, the taste of MP3 still in their mouths? "When e-books happen, they're gone," Brass said.

One of the remarkable things about the book is how long the same concerns have surrounded it: archivability, affordability, freedom to publish. Over time the book has given up its anonymity in many small ways, including copyright registration, International Standard Book Numbers (ISBNs), bar codes. The act of reading has lost some of its privacy, too. When Kenneth Starr wanted to know what books Monica Lewinsky had given President Clinton, he subpoenaed her Kramerbooks account. A federal court rejected the subpoena, pointing out that the confidentiality of the books we buy is protected by a higher standard than that of ordinary purchases. The government must show a "compelling need" to know. (Though you might expect Lewinsky to have been inured to humiliation, this

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incident offended her deeply. She complained about it in *Monica's Story.*)

No one knows exactly what books I have in my house—and no one cares. The risk of buying electronic books is not really censorship. It is the end of informal information dissemination—pressing a book on a friend, picking up a paperback at a rummage sale, handing a dollar to the guy on the sidewalk who's selling books off a blanket. This is one way ideas move through the culture. There's an accidentalness to reading—one of its pleasures—that the computer world doesn't think much about.

Dick Brass was in New York one day after E-Books II to announce that R. R. Donnelley, the nation's largest book printer, would be working to convert books to e-books. He tweaked publishers by holding his press conference at the Algonquin Hotel. Volumes by the various Round Table writers surrounded us, tucked behind glass. Brass let me use the Microsoft Reader, now in a pre-release version. He had it running on a small handheld device like a Palm Pilot. It had a nice little screen, and it fit—with some strain—into the breast pocket of my jacket. I read a bit of *Alice in Wonderland,* more attracted by the rainbow-colored "please wait" icon that spun round and round as the device sent me forward to the next page. Alice was falling down the rabbit hole again. In all, though, the Microsoft Reader was really not very different from a Rocket eBook.

What was unique was the provision it made for security. The Reader can vary the level, depending on what you want to read. There are five security levels, as if books were a biohazard. Level three, which Brass expects will be standard, imprints your name on the e-book text. If you lend, copy, or sell the text illegally, you can be traced, but it is unlikely anyone will bother. "It's for keeping honest people honest," he said. The highest level is five. It will connect the text to your laptop or e-book forever. You can't read the book on any other machine, and no other machine can read the book. Lose the laptop, lose the book. It's like a return to the medieval library, when books were so valuable that they were kept on chains. Brass expects level five to be used "for books by Tom Clancy and other top-line authors." The system has given publishers confidence, even though the Stephen King e-book was hacked and new search engines like Napster present a bigger challenge than MP3. Recently Simon & Schuster even agreed to license e-book editions of some *Star Trek* titles. The security system will ultimately have other functions, too. It will be able to make a record of every time you open the book. "Advertising, pay by the page, pay by the hour—all these are being considered," Brass said. Ultimately the goal is, as programmers put it, to "carpet-bomb the world with content." They will put hundreds of thousands of books on every hard drive, along with thousands of songs, movies, etc. You will pay a toll when you want to use them.

This had its appeal—a library on every computer, just waiting for a reader. It was very Borgesian. But I couldn't get past my uneasiness at the

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idea of a computer tracking not just what I bought but what I read. Brass scoffed at my worries—not because he thought they were unimportant but because they were too late. "You lost your privacy when something called the Web was being put together," he told me.

I thought about that when I paid a visit to the media lab at MIT, where I hoped to meet Jacobson, the co-inventor of electronic ink who had proclaimed the death of the printed book. A publicist gave me a fascinating tour of the lab. I saw computers that were learning to predict what I will want to wear, what newspapers will interest me. (I was pleased to see that the secretaries still relied on IBM Selectrics to type their labels, though). I even saw a computer that was going to help me write my screenplay, there being only eight plots in Hollywood anyway.

It turned out that Jacobson was tired of spreading the word. He was now concentrating on step two of the Last Book: increasing the storage capacity of disk drives. When I walked into Jacobson's lab, I found only a graduate student studying a violin wrapped in wires. The place depressed me: I was chasing the anti-Gutenberg through a building whose bookcases held only software, videotapes, and old stacks of *Wired*. Suddenly I missed Brass (equal parts Goethe's Faust and Johann Fust, the first publisher), who appreciated that books had lasted for fourteen hundred years for a reason. On my way out, the publicist asked me to sign an agreement restricting my use of what I had learned. I refused.

When I got home, I went to my brother's house, where my four-year-old nephew and six-year-old niece were waiting. We had a long-standing play date. Jonah enjoyed opening and closing the SoftBook. I took this as a victory for the McLuhanites. The medium really was the message. Hannah has been learning to read over the past two years with such ferocity that her parents sometimes have to pry her hands off her books when it is time to go to bed. I remember that moment, that first discovery of the power of the written word. Hannah liked *Charlotte's Web* on paper because the illustrations were better, but she also liked how fast you could read *Charlotte's Web* on-screen by clicking the button. I asked her which she preferred. "Any book," she answered, surprising me. This, I realized, was important. If it was not the only point about this technology, it was at least a crucial one, and one we would be foolish to ignore. Bits, atoms, paper, plastic are going to change Citizen X's life, but what's going to matter most is what she reads.

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Truth, Lies, Fact, Fiction

FREDERICK BUSCH

In most scholarly research, and in the digging out and reporting of news, *fact* means *true.* In the writing of fiction, *fact* and *truth* are less easy to reconcile. I am an amphibian, inhabiting the classrooms of a university as well as the less-lighted place in which fiction is perpetrated, and I have a story to tell—facts to disclose? truths up to which I wish to sidle?—about a story I have told.

I wrote a novel called *The Night Inspector,* which was published last year and to which a lot of reviewers and readers were generous. Not so the editor who had bought the book on the basis of a seven-page proposal. It was supposed to be "about" Herman Melville and his disgrace as a writer and the death of his son, Malcolm. It was thus—my poor editor apparently thought—to be, as so many editors wish their books to boast, BASED ON A TRUE STORY. It was to shine and shimmy with, well, *facts.*

Here's how it went between us during one painful telephone conversation after she had taken six weeks to respond to the manuscript I'd sent her:

EDITOR: Fred, you have Melville in a boat that his friends are rowing up the Hudson.

BUSCH: I love that scene.

EDITOR: Yes. Very nice. But, Fred—they're rowing upstream.

BUSCH: I *love* that scene.

EDITOR: But you can't *row* upstream.

BUSCH: Sure you can.

Frederick Busch is Fairchild Professor of Literature at Colgate University. His new collection of stories, *Don't Tell Anyone,* will be published this fall.

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EDITOR: Not up the Hudson. I live above it. I watch it flow. You cannot row up the Hudson *River.*

So the battle was joined. She had the facts—upstream, row, can't row, etc.—based on her keen observation from the windows of her twenty-fifth-floor apartment above Riverside Drive in Manhattan. I had the authorial necessity: I wanted my protagonist, in a nineteenth-century version of a car chase I had always longed to write, to be pursuing the malefactors against the current and against the odds. She thought an editor's job was to uphold the facts. And she thought you got the facts by standing in your bathrobe at a window, sipping coffee, and watching the Hudson course by.

Then I told her the actual facts. "The Hudson is a tidal river," I said. "It rises and it falls. It goes this way, and it goes that. A log dropped into the river at Albany can take a month to make its way, *with* the current, down to the Hudson's mouth. You *can* row against the current and, with luck, as I gave it to my characters, you can catch the villains."

I was not wedded to the facts because they were the facts. I embraced them because they permitted me to write plausibly—to create a dramatic scene that forwarded the action and metaphor of my fiction: Herman Melville, standing in the stern of a rowing boat, holding a long gaff hook, and resembling his own Captain Ahab, standing in the stern of *his* rowing boat, in pursuit of Moby-Dick and all that he represented. The facts were useful to meaning: Melville worked *down* at the docks, downtown in New York City, and the malefactors, who had assembled at his workplace, could only flee uptown—against the Hudson's tide. If they fled in the other direction, they could escape by cruising in their steam-powered vessel past the Battery, around the tip of Governors Island, into Buttermilk Channel, and away. By sending them against the current, we could chart their progress by the street numbers, and they would run into a wrecked coal barge I had planted, several chapters earlier, just beneath the surface, where I knew they would run aground upon it. The facts served fiction and the fiction served what I saw as a truth—about Melville, about his New York City, and about the nation in its postwar fevers—so the facts were included. Otherwise, I'd have found a way around them.

That was the first stage of our struggle for possession of my novel. The battle grew ferocious. My editor ultimately crossed out most of my sentences and replaced them with her own. When I read my modest sentence "He drank his coffee," revised by her, in bright blue felt-tip pen, to read, "He quaffed the steaming dark bitter brew," I threw what can only be called a tantrum, and the editor was removed from the fray. Still, this person's bewilderment by facts and dismay about fiction provided an experience instructive for me and perhaps useful to others.

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In 1867, the year in which *The Night Inspector* is set, Herman Melville lives on East Twenty-sixth Street in Manhattan, near Madison Square, and he works as a deputy inspector of customs at the Port of New York. He rows out to moored ships and inspects their cargo. He wears a little tin federal badge and carries a black federal notebook. He has a federal lock with which he can impound cargoes. He is thought by many of his literary friends to be dead, and in some ways he may seem to be. For he is considered, not only by critics and hack reviewers but by himself, to be a failure. All of his books are out of print. *Moby-Dick* got bad reviews, on the whole, and sold a few thousand copies. *Pierre* earned him the derision of the literary establishment. Nobody in 1867 seems to care that he wrote *The Confidence Man* or the brilliant *Piazza Tales*, or the powerful Civil War poems of *Battle-Pieces*. He suffers what we would now call depression. He drinks too much. He is cruel to his wife and children and, of course, to himself. He is, in other words, the very essence of what writers fear most in their interior speculations and public careers: he is a lesson in how to squander talent, mismanage a literary life, and poison the domestic one.

Much of what I have said is based on "fact" scraped away from the brilliant compilation of Melville's days by Jay Leyda in *The Melville Log*; from the patient, scrupulous research of Melville scholars like Hershel Parker, G. Thomas Tanselle, Wyn Kelley, Elizabeth Renker, Hennig Cohen; reminiscences of contemporaries; Melville's own few surviving letters. In the *Log*, Leyda offered some contemporary documents—newspaper articles among them—including the story, in a Boston newspaper, of the death of Melville's son, Malcolm, at the age of eighteen. It was that report which spurred me to write my novel—to try to find a way of linking the exterior life of a publicly owned major writer to the interior and domestic moments that involve a father in the death of his son.

The story of the boy's death was in the form of an editorial in the *Boston Weekly Advertiser*. It asks: "But the pistol? How came he by it? He had carried it in his pocket and slept with it under his pillow for weeks, as he told his fellow clerks and his brother Stanwix. Having recently joined a volunteer regiment, he had a boy's newly awakened enthusiasm for whatever related in any way to weapons, arms and military equipments. . . . He had been out sometimes pretty late in the evening after joining the military organization already referred to."

A coroner's jury held its inquest and announced "that the said Child came to his death by suicide by shooting himself in the head with a pistol at said place while laboring under temporary insanity of Mind." The finding exacerbated the Melvilles' grief. John C. Hoadley, a friend and supporter of Melville, an influential inventor, industrialist, and political man, succeeded in persuading the coroner's jury to modify its verdict. Within three days, the jurors told the *Evening Post* that, since declaring his death a suicide, they had learned of Malcolm's "boyish whim" of sleeping

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with his pistol under his pillow, and they issued the statement that "we believe that his death was caused by his own hand, but not that the act was by premeditation or consciously done which goes to clear the reputation of the deceased young man from the imputation of suicide."

And *then* that piece appeared on the editorial page of a Boston paper, signed by one J.C.H.—none other than John C. Hoadley, spreading the word. The reference in his letter to Malcolm's staying out late, almost as if it were in connection with vague military responsibilities, echoes a problem with lateness that the Melvilles attested to. They had a night latch to which Malcolm was not given the key, though he was given a curfew. He came home late, and Lizzie Melville had to admit him. She, Herman reported to all who would listen, did not scold him; no harsh words were exchanged, he took pains to tell. Malcolm didn't come down to breakfast the next morning, and it wasn't until Melville returned from the docks that night and broke into his son's room that they discovered his body. Yet Stanwix, the younger brother, who was wrecked by this death, periodically went deaf—as if he had heard the shot and wished to deny it. If Stanwix *had* heard the shot, why had not Lizzie or one of the two daughters also heard it?

A novelist moves swiftly from such speculations and questions to the consideration of writing down, in dramatic form, what could have, what might have, occurred. Once he does so, he has appropriated the people: they are his characters, and his contemplations become their destiny.

But what about the historical *facts*, my former editor might wonder. They are very few: (1) The boy came home late, as he'd been doing frequently. (2) He and his mother spoke, but we don't know what they said. (3) He died of a pistol wound.

No, the former editor might say, the *other* facts: his need to be out late in connection with his having volunteered for the National Guard, his sleeping with the gun at hand—under the pillow, in fact—and the happy family's surprise at the awful accident.

Well, those "facts" are the confabulation of Lizzie and Herman Melville's grief, wishes, hopes, and maybe lies. They are the further work, the artifacts, of that cunning artificer John C. Hoadley, who conducted a public relations campaign of the most effective sort, influencing a jury, writing letters, getting them placed in Boston papers so that the revised story would be reported in the New York press.

What "facts" can the novelist work with? That Melville was sometimes a cruel father, reducing his children to tears; that he was despondent over his ruin; that he and his wife lived in tension and domestic combat; that Malcolm was out late a good deal; that the boy had a gun; that an event took place between the mother (but perhaps not Herman Melville) and him when he returned to the house in defiance of its rules.

Melville was a novelist, and he was a man of fortitude and courage. No

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one who has written of knowing him in those latter days in New York claimed to know that he kept writing. But he did: at night, by flickering light, after an exhausting day on the water and the docks, he worked at a short novel that he knew would never be published in his lifetime. It was not. I stress this: he *knew* it would not be published, but he wrote and wrote and wrote at it. For he was about art, not about publication. Melville died in 1891; the manuscript was discovered in a metal breadbox in 1921 and published, at last, in 1924; it revived American interest in him and was instrumental in the rescue of his reputation. It is called, of course, *Billy Budd.* And it is, of course, about a sea captain who takes a fatherly interest in a seaman who, in turn, thinks of the captain as a kind of father. In obedience to stern laws, the captain must hang the boy. The boy blesses and forgives him as he goes to his death.

That is what I think Herman Melville did with the "facts" of his son's death: he created a way for the boy to forgive him. He was metaphorically the sea captain, as Malcolm was Billy Budd. The novel was Melville's report on his yearning for—it was perhaps his prayer for—forgiveness.

And what did I, the lesser novelist, aggrandizing that agonized genius's life and work, do with the "facts"?

Simple. I ate them all, metabolized them as I needed to, and came up with the "facts" of my novel. The editorial became a news item in the *Boston Advertiser.* It was written by a man named Samuel Mordecai, who had served in the Union army with a man named William Bartholomew, who had been a sniper and had been shot in the face and maimed. Mordecai, after reporting the death of the son of a man whose work he knew and admired, journeyed to New York, where Bartholomew lived as a financial speculator, to follow up on the Melville story. Bartholomew, who needed Melville's knowledge of and access to the docks, had a scheme in mind to import certain forbidden cargo. Bartholomew, the narrator, tells us that he befriended Melville. Samuel Mordecai, Bartholomew's war companion, in pursuit of a story and—he is a newspaperman, after all—thinking that he has a novel in him, took notes on his adventures with Melville and William Bartholomew in New York City.

As they have a drink at the Astor Hotel one night, Sam Mordecai proudly shows his friend and hero, Bartholomew—who shields the world from his maimed face with a smiling pasteboard mask—what he has been writing about Melville. This is what Bartholomew, *not* a literary man, but a former sniper and a deadly serious financier, reads in Sam's notebook. It is meant by Sam Mordecai to be Herman Melville's thinking:

> Wednesday, Sept 11: Pain at the shoulder and rib and elbow and thigh from flinging myself against the latched, heavy door—Panting behind me of Lizzie and Bessie, while Fanny wailed and Stanwix, alone among

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> us as always, from where the corridor curved, stood in his silence and the nighttime of his solitude—In the door, then, and in myself with Lizzie and Bess behind—The poor boy so pale, paler than the bedclothes, and his fine face stained with the startling boldness of his blood, and so much of it—The weapon of his own destruction in his strong, square hand—Then Fanny crowding in, and the cries as of seabirds in a frenzy on the water far from home—the silence I felt, I *felt* it, from Stanwix Melville, the only remaining male in our small family who might one day sire a son—And no stern words behind us, like a pennant on a scuttled vessel's mast—All had done their best—All had done their all—Lord in whom I would believe and fear I may not—How little he has done to deserve this dying—Why might you not have taken me?—I wished to say this to Lizzie—Could not—Lips sealed—Silences among us broader than the oceans of unspoken words in the past—My children blighted—Household boiling in silences of fever—Gall for dinner—Bile for tea—Great emptiness abounding in our rooms—

When he is finished reading perhaps twenty pages like this, and they're drinking their Port, Bartholomew says, "Sam, did he tell you these thoughts?"

"Of course not," the reporter says, "I wrote them. I created them."

"And you are certain of these insights, then? That he—Sam, how can you know this?"

Sam opens his mouth, as if to answer, "then seemed to think better of it, and he laid a finger upon his lips, and he smiled with a gentle, knowing humor. Finally he did speak, but to say only this: 'Invention also speaks a certain truth. Have you not recounted your adventures in battle? And subtly altered what another might term *fact*?'"

And here William Bartholomew speaks not only for all fact-checkers and certain editors, but for all literalists, for all those bound by what they think of as "fact." He asks his friend, the author, "And why would he think—he so formerly famed for his abilities to recall and construct scenes of vividness and drama—why would he think so illogically? so repetitively? . . . These thoughts are so contradictory and so unverifiable. So speculative, that is to say, Sam. Hysterical! You think of him as crazed? . . . I am sorry. . . . You know that I have only affection for you and the best of hopes for your career. . . . Not, of course, that I know anything of authorship. Clearly, since you have thus done it, thus it is achieved . . . those—forgive me—puzzling notations?"

"Entries in a log," Sam says, "as one might find in the belongings of a sailor."

"A log! So he records the events of his voyage, you say."

"On an inner ocean," Sam tells him.

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But Bartholomew remains as puzzled as the former editor of his book. So Sam, the author, shuts up and takes another drink, keeping to himself his understanding: that facts aren't always facts; that facts are hardly always the truth; that fiction isn't always factual, and—though BASED, as its author might claim, ON A TRUE STORY—it isn't always useful fiction. Samuel Mordecai would tell us that fiction is useful when it gets us to some truths. Facts, unless they are sonograms for surgeons or map vectors for a rescue party, often lead to less than what is true.

The truths known by Sam are as simple as Sam's author. They are injunctions in the profession as well as requirements of the soul. But they aren't the precepts of my former editor, and I should acknowledge that perhaps the requirements of the marketplace, as she interprets them, do not permit her to think of achieving art so much as to search for the gusts that belly out her edited vessel's sales. Melville understood the wish for such winds. He learned to turn his face from them. He left the gust-whipped surface, and he dove deep. And Sam, whom I wrote of as writing of Melville, knew what he must do:

Labor to lie well, and dream of lying wonderfully.
Seek out and tell us what passes for the truth.

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The Loon

MARY OLIVER

Not quite four A.M., when the rapture of being alive
strikes me from sleep, and I rise
from the comfortable bed and go
to another room, where my books are lined up
in their neat and colorful rows. How

magical they are! I choose one
and open it. Soon
I have wandered in over the waves of the words
to the temple of thought.

And then I hear
outside, over the actual waves, the small,
perfect voice of the loon. He is also awake,
and with his heavy head uplifted he calls out
to the fading moon, to the pink flush
swelling in the east that, soon,
will become the long, reasonable day.

Inside the house
it is still dark, except for the pool of lamplight
in which I am sitting.

I do not close the book.

Neither, for a long while, do I read on.

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Falling in Love with Yiddish

MATTHEW GOODMAN

I fell in love with Yiddish in 1994, which is to say, too late. I was thirty-two years old at the time and felt that the most interesting and meaningful parts of life—marriage, family, career—were still out there ahead of me. For Yiddish, at the close of an unimaginably cruel century, the situation was precisely the opposite. In recent decades Yiddish had endured a series of crippling blows: not just the Holocaust but also Stalin's purges, the Zionist Hebrew-language campaigns, and Jewish assimilation in the West, a process slower and far gentler but no less damaging. By the time I discovered Yiddish, it was clear that all of the important events that would ever happen in or to this language had already happened; Yiddish was, if not on its deathbed, then certainly in its dotage, left only to remember past glories. Yet even in this enfeebled state, Yiddish still retained something that could cause a person like me—assimilated, deeply conflicted about my Judaism, raised in an entirely English-speaking household—to fall in love with it. Such was the power it still held, even then.

These things are, of course, always a bit elusive, but I believe I can place exactly when it was that I fell in love with Yiddish. It was a Tuesday evening in early spring—April 5, to be exact—and I was attending the first session of a beginning Yiddish course held at the offices of the Workmen's Circle (an organization dedicated to the preservation of Yiddish culture) in Brookline, an affluent, largely Jewish suburb of Boston. Five or six of us had gathered that night in a damp, poorly heated

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classroom, a few folding chairs scattered about, framed portraits of mustachioed patriarchs gazing sternly down at us from the walls. Our instructor, an energetic woman of about sixty, asked us to introduce ourselves and say a little about why we had decided to study Yiddish. Every other student, I recall, mentioned a desire to communicate with older Yiddish-speaking relatives in their native tongue. As for me, I had no relatives left with whom I might speak it; I vaguely remembered my paternal grandparents speaking Yiddish to each other when they wanted to keep a conversation private (in the well-worn phrase, *kedey di kinder zoln nisht farshteyn*—so the children won't understand—a practice by which Yiddish became for generations of American children a language of exclusion, a focus of their own resentment), but my grandparents were now gone, and I didn't know anyone else who spoke the language. Awkwardly, I mumbled something about having begun work on a novel that had a few Yiddish speakers in it, and hoping that an acquaintance with some of the language would add "verisimilitude." This, I was well aware, was not the case (I knew even then that the Yiddish in the book would be relatively inconsequential), but I thought that it might sound professional and impressive to my classmates; more to the point, I could not come up with another reason.

The class began like any other language course, with simple, themed vocabulary (chalk/*krayt,* blackboard/*tovl,* eraser/*meker*), phrases of greeting, the various forms taken by the definite article. The Yiddish words I copied down in my notebook (*heftl,* as I had now learned) in roman letters, just as I have transliterated them here. Yiddish, though, while being primarily of Germanic derivation, uses a modified Hebrew alphabet, and is read, like Hebrew, from right to left. I didn't know the Hebrew letters, never having attended Hebrew school as a kid, and the task was further complicated by the fact that handwritten Yiddish does not attempt to replicate the complicated letters of printed Yiddish, and instead uses simplified characters that may or may not resemble their printed form. So to learn Yiddish I needed to learn not just one but two new alphabets, and in the opening pages of that notebook I can see my first attempts to reproduce the sideways fishhook of the *beys,* the smiling profile of the *pey,* the grand upward flourish of the *tsadek,* my handwriting emerging shaky, spidery, like that of an elderly person.

The letters were strange, the words unfamiliar, but before the class was out I could feel an excitement rising in my chest; I understood already that without my having anticipated it, something in my life had changed irreversibly. On my way home that night I stopped at the nearby Kosher Butcherie for whitefish and *tsimmes* (falling in love, one wants to surround oneself with the world of the beloved), and then ate while I continued to read at the dining room table. The book that had been handed out to us that night, a slim, self-published volume called *Yiddish for Begin-*

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ners, written by a Dr. Jean B. Jofen (whose home address, I remember marveling, had been printed on the inside front cover), presented lessons that managed to be elementary and at the same time indisputably, even comically, Jewish in tone. (The sample conversation provided in the book's first lesson includes this passage: "How is your daughter?" "She is not well." "Is she ill?" "Yes, she is very ill." "Must she lie in bed?" "Yes, she must lie in bed.") Alone in the darkened house, I read these pages aloud, over and over, delighting in my newfound ability to decipher, however laboriously, the exotic letters that ran right to left—east to west—before me.

The Tuesday evenings went on, and the other students came to class or didn't, did their homework or didn't, were improving or weren't. By the end of the semester they were still stumbling over passages that I had virtually committed to memory. I remember several times my instructor asking in amazement, "You never studied Hebrew? Nobody ever spoke Yiddish to you growing up?"

No, never, I replied, at least as surprised as she was to discover the claim that Yiddish had made on me. I had taken Spanish all through junior high and high school and into college, but this, I understood, was different. Studying a foreign language is much like travel in a foreign land: interesting, exciting, but at the same time often intimidating, difficult, discomfiting. For me, studying Yiddish seemed as though I were traveling, instead, through the streets of a long-forgotten hometown, in which I turned a corner and encountered there a structure dimly remembered. It seems strange to say, even now, but for me the work always had a certain quality not of learning, necessarily, but rather of remembering.

Over time I became familiar with a certain bemused look on the faces of people to whom I mentioned that I was studying Yiddish. Some people (mostly those who grew up in Yiddish-speaking households) expressed admiration for my efforts to keep a dying language alive; others wondered why I would devote myself to such a limited and plainly doomed enterprise. Far more, though, seemed taken aback by the very notion that one could study Yiddish—that it was a genuine language, with its own alphabet and rules of grammar. They had apparently thought of it merely as a collection of funny-sounding words—*shlemiel, kibitz, meshuge, plotz:* a language composed, it would seem, entirely of punch lines.

Such is the fate of a language that has lost its historical necessity; I would imagine that a similar process is already under way with, say, Istriot or Livonian. In America, at least among the general population (some branches of Hasidic Jewry continue to speak Yiddish as their primary language), Yiddish will be remembered in the words that have managed to find their way into common parlance, used by those who might not even know the provenance of, for instance, *shlep* or *chutzpah.* (I have a student, a Gentile autoworker from Detroit, who told me recently about a

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"tchotchke" he had picked up at a yard sale.) The rest of them will disappear, of interest only to scholars for their historical value, like Sumerian water routes or medieval instructions for manipulating the bodily humors.

The Yiddish dictionary of standard usage, *The Modern English-Yiddish Yiddish-English Dictionary,* by Uriel Weinreich, contains some twenty thousand Yiddish words. (The Weinreichs are the royal family of Yiddish scholarship; Uriel's father, Max, was the author of, among many other works, the magisterial *History of the Yiddish Language.*) Of these twenty thousand words, approximately 70 percent are of Germanic derivation, 20 percent are Hebrew, 10 percent are from the Slavic, and the remaining handful are derived from Romance languages or are modern borrowings from English (the word *televizie,* for example, meaning television). Though its exact origins are unclear, Yiddish seems to have come into being during the early Middle Ages, probably in the area of the Rhine, or farther east, along the Danube. Its primary root is High German (linguistically, Yiddish and modern German are of equal stature, having descended from the same mother tongue), but it eventually absorbed words from those other languages as Jews—pushed out of Germany by a religious zealotry inspired in part by the Black Plague—moved eastward into Poland and the Russian lands and eventually, through mass immigration, to America. In this way, Yiddish embodies a kind of chronicle, accumulated over centuries, of the Jewish people's wanderings.

Until the Holocaust, Yiddish was the spoken language of two-thirds of the world's Jews. Indeed, for hundreds of years, it was primarily an oral language; written documents, from prayers to business transactions, were reserved for the holy language of Hebrew (though some books were written in Yiddish specifically for women, or for men said to be "like women"—that is, that they had never learned Hebrew). In the late nineteenth century, in the wake of the European Enlightenment, urbanized, secular Yiddish writers—the best known being Mendele Moykher-Sforim, Sholem Aleichem, and I. L. Peretz—began to produce the first genuine Yiddish literature. What followed over the next half century or so was an entirely unexpected literary explosion, one of the most remarkable outpourings of written art that any language has ever witnessed—short stories, novels, dramas, poetry, much of it comparable to the finest literature of its time, much of it written at night by men and women who worked during the day as housepainters and paperhangers, as cutters, pressers, stitchers, operators, or, for the more fortunate, as teachers or journalists. In New York, a group of young poets who called themselves the Inzikhists (Introspectivists) created a strikingly modern free-verse poetry that found its inspiration not just in tales of Jewish history but also in Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, Picasso. In 1919, the Inzikhists issued a manifesto that declared, in part: "We think that our language is now beautiful and rich

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enough for the most profound poetry. All the high achievements of poetry—the highest—are possible in Yiddish."

To write in Yiddish instead of some other language was, for most of these poets, a conscious choice. (The greatest of the Inzikhists, Yankev Glatshteyn, studied law for a time at New York University, while his compatriot Moyshe-Leyb Halpern first published poems in German.) They loved Yiddish and were deeply committed to the idea that their truest artistic impulses could be expressed only in this, the historic language of the Jewish people. It was an entirely understandable and even admirable decision, but one that in the end would doom these writers to obscurity. Just four years later, in 1923, an article in the literary journal *In Zikh* was already complaining about the lack of attention given to Yiddish poetry in the wider world; as the years passed, the situation continued to deteriorate, and by 1937 the poet A. Leyeles could do little more than express his "rankling annoyance" that "the pettiest Jewish scribbler in English, the lowest reporter on an English newspaper feels sky-high above Yiddish." The next year, Yankev Glatshteyn cogently characterized the Yiddish writer's increasingly isolated condition in an essay entitled "By Ourselves." "I do not know," he wrote, "if there is a better parallel to ghetto life than writing Yiddish."

By this time, Yiddish readership in the United States was already in steep decline, owing both to restricted immigration and to expanded Jewish assimilation into the wider society. Still, no one could have anticipated the infinitely greater catastrophe of the Holocaust and the devastating impact it would have on Yiddish literature, even for those writers who had not perished in the death camps. Glatshteyn ceased for the most part the formal experimentation of his youth and began writing poems with titles like "On the Butcher Block," "Goodnight, World," and "Without Jews." In Europe, the poet, essayist, and novelist Itzik Manger—who had lost in the Holocaust not just his beloved brother but virtually his entire readership—suffered a nervous breakdown, dissipated himself in drink, and rarely wrote again. Anna Margolin, who was writing persona poetry before T. S. Eliot created J. Alfred Prufrock, died in 1952; her tombstone in the Workmen's Circle cemetery in New York contains this heartbreaking self-composed epitaph (translated by Naomi Seidman), a final summing-up by a poet who had spent a lifetime writing in a language that now, it was apparent, had no future. "She squandered her beauty on filth and nothing," it begins,

> Maybe she wanted it, maybe she desired
> Unhappiness, pain's seven knives.
> And she spilled life's holy wine
> On filth, on nothing . . .
> Passerby, have pity and be silent.
> Say nothing.

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Today, a Yiddish library resembles nothing so much as an ancient columbarium, the ashes of countless dead writers stored in their decorative cases on the shelves. And yet, as with some magic formula concocted by a medieval cabalist, these ashes can come alive again for those who have learned the hidden language. When I first read Manger's novel *Dos bukh fun gan-eydn* (The Book of Paradise), about the baby Shmuel-Aba, who is born with his memories of Paradise intact, or Sholem Aleichem's *Ayznban-geshiktes* (Railroad Stories), or the poetry of Glatshteyn, Margolin, or Zishe Landau, I discovered that I felt on more familiar terms with these writers—who had lived half a century and, many of them, half a planet away from me—than I did with almost all of my contemporaries; the world about which they wrote was entirely exotic and yet, at the same time, somehow known. A child of innumerable generations of Diaspora, I instinctively comprehended that particular sensibility (reverent and ironic and self-mocking, full of overwrought pathos and a grim, mordant comedy) which can be truly expressed only in this exilic language, a language, as Isaac Bashevis Singer said in his Nobel acceptance speech, "without a land, without frontiers, not supported by any government, a language which possesses no words for weapons, ammunition, military exercises, war tactics."

For me, Yiddish seemed to embody a different and more appealing sort of Jewishness, one that had little to do with an increasingly martial and forbidding Israel (where Yiddish, considered a relic of a shameful ghetto past, has long held second-class status), support for which has long been a sine qua non in the modern American synagogue. I had always deeply distrusted the smug, easy Jewishness of my suburban hometown, an ethnic identification that too often seemed to be expressed in lavish bar mitzvahs and the purchase of Israel bonds. Still, despite my discomfort with the religion I grew up around, I had always felt inside me *dos pintele yid,* the essential spark of Jewishness, which I didn't entirely comprehend but knew must mean more than a taste for Woody Allen films and sable on my bagels. Over the years I circled around the institutions of more conventional Judaism, seeking a path that felt somehow right. I taught classes in history and ethics in a Hebrew school, worked in a soup kitchen as part of one synagogue's "social action" group, attended Friday-night services in several synagogues of widely differing sensibilities. But though I had often enjoyed the services, and sometimes even felt moved by them, I was never able to shed fully the alienation of my youth, the sense of playacting that I always felt when I bowed my head and murmured the ritual prayers.

Not specifically religious and yet indisputably Jewish, Yiddish was for me a way into Judaism that didn't go through the synagogue door. Like the religion itself, Yiddish is a tradition that has helped to shape and sustain the Jewish people for countless generations, and whose own suste-

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nance requires that succeeding generations take the burden of its existence upon themselves. In learning Yiddish, I felt myself adding one more link to *di goldene keyt,* the golden chain: an act that seemed to me—no less than, say, keeping kosher or observing the Sabbath—holy.

Little by little, the past seeped into me, the milk wagons and cattle markets and bagel peddlers, the itinerant preachers *(magidim)* and poor Talmud scholars, the writers' clubs with their soaring ambitions and petty rivalries, the cafés and Yiddish theaters that once lined Second Avenue, the tiny tenement kitchens that cooked *derma* and *cholent* and *tsimmes* and *petcha,* and the Eastern European wedding jesters who over time evolved into the *tummlers* (literally, noisemakers) spreading merriment in a hundred Catskills hotels. When I read, in Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers,* about Jewish immigrants who had the temerity to bring socialist politics to their adopted capitalist home (the commitment, learned over millennia of Jewish history, was to principle rather than territory), who struck and fought to build labor unions, who worked in sweatshops during the day and discussed Tolstoy and Marx at night—all of it in Yiddish—I felt that I understood for the first time that I am who I am because of these people, most of whom died long before I was born: as good a definition as any, I suppose, of tradition. Yiddish, it turned out, was my native land, my ancestral center, and as I studied verb positions and adverbial complements, I could almost feel myself making *aliyah,* returning home.

Of course, to live with Yiddish today is to live in a kind of terminal ward, amid a haunted, ruined landscape, a place where the past will always seem brighter and more vital than the present and where the future is a closed book. Still, in the beginning, at least, that doesn't seem to matter much; one sees only one's love and doesn't think too hard about what the future might bring. Yes, the prognosis may be bleak, but sitting at the sickbed of the newly beloved, one is moved to cry out, *Don't worry, I can save you;* and for a while, at least, it is even possible to believe it.

I ended up moving to New York, in part because it was the only non-retirement city in the United States that was still able to maintain an active—though of course sharply attenuated—Yiddish culture. In the city I found myself wandering the streets of the Lower East Side, looking for any remaining traces of the Yiddish past. The neighborhood seemed layered into strata, like bedrock; most of the conversations on the street were being carried on in Chinese or Spanish, but here and there, above the dilapidated storefronts, were signs in Hebrew and, occasionally, Yiddish, advertising religious items and burial monuments. Sometimes I strolled the boardwalk in the Russian Jewish enclave of Brighton Beach, sidling up to elderly couples just to see if I might hear a snatch or two of Yiddish conversation. This, however, happened very rarely; outside of

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some Hasidic communities, there are simply not enough Yiddish speakers left to allow one to encounter the language in everyday life. And so one is forced to seek it out, to create artificial situations to be with others who have also made a decision to speak the language. For a while some friends and I played in a Yiddish-language basketball game every Wednesday morning in Tompkins Square Park, just a few blocks over from Second Avenue. For an hour or so we would shoot hoops and talk Yiddish—we called each other by our Yiddish names: Motl, Yankl, Reuven, Moishe—before heading off to jobs in academia or the computer industry, and I always felt slightly ridiculous, somehow fraudulent, doing it. But we had no better alternatives, nothing that might allow us to feel a part of a living Yiddish culture. For us, there was no homeland across the ocean, no Italy or Spain or France or Ireland where we might have taken a junior year abroad. Of course there had been once, a Yiddish world of schools and markets and factories and theaters, in Warsaw and Kiev and Kovno and Vilna and thousands of rural *shtetlekh,* but that world was, in Roman Vishniac's poignant descriptive, "vanished." It was gone now, gone forever, a vast Pompeii stretching across half a continent.

The world of Yiddish today is a world of canes and walkers and wheelchairs; over time I became accustomed to being a part of audiences composed entirely of old people. In the lobby of the Folksbiene, New York's last remaining Yiddish theater, I saw a sign that offered headphones with simultaneous English or Russian translations for audience members who didn't speak Yiddish; just below it, another sign offered hearing aids. At the Allerton branch of the New York Public Library, in a formerly Jewish neighborhood in the Bronx, I attended a poetry reading by Richard Fein, an American poet who came to Yiddish as an adult and has done some excellent English translations of Yiddish poetry. As is standard in poetry readings, he began by testing the microphone and asking if everyone could hear. "Not too good," came a voice from somewhere near the back, a comment that was met with general assent from around the room. So he tried it again, and then again, louder and louder each time ("Is this all right? How about this?"), until eventually he was nearly shouting his poems. The reading itself was punctuated by complaints from audience members about the room's temperature and lighting, loud remarks assessing each poem in turn, and, of course, during the discussion period, the inevitable argument about whether Yiddish was doomed. (Whether or not anyone chose to raise it, this was the question that hung over all such gatherings, the only question that really seemed to matter.)

It was impossible, leaving these events, not to feel a difficult mix of emotions. On the one hand, the Yiddish itself was always beautiful, like a rare vase brought out for display; and it was frankly inspiring to be around people who, so late in life, could still get worked up about poetry

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or the political issues of the day. And I have to admit that I was often silently amused by the *kvetching* of these old Jewish people: it made me feel at home. Yet more and more, as I moved deeper into Yiddish, I was gripped by a sadness that would not go away.

I remember, for example, attending the centennial celebration for the Yiddish *Forward,* known in Yiddish as the *Forverts.* On the stage of New York's Town Hall—the paper's fiftieth anniversary had been held in Madison Square Garden—performers sang festive Yiddish songs and recited important articles from the paper's history; in the balcony, looking down at the rows and rows of bald or white-haired heads below me, I found myself unable to shake the thought that there would never be a bicentennial celebration for this newspaper, and that indeed it would be fortunate to last out the decade. (Not long ago I received a phone call from someone doing a telephone survey of *Forverts* subscribers, who inquired about my age, profession, income, and so forth. I asked him if I was the youngest person he had spoken with that day; after a moment's hesitation, he admitted that I was, that all the others had been in their seventies or eighties.) A daily circulation that once numbered more than a quarter of a million has now dropped to a weekly circulation of perhaps ten thousand. Far more people read the two newer incarnations of the *Forward,* published in English and in Russian, which share the original's name but are editorially separate newspapers addressed to very different audiences. One is aimed at the Americanized descendants of the immigrant generations, a scarce few of whom speak Yiddish; the other is for recent Jewish immigrants from Russia who at one time would have used Yiddish as their primary language, but no longer do so. These days, the *Forverts* confronts a situation unique among American newspapers: not just its readership but also its staff is quickly dying off and cannot be replaced. Being able to read the *Forverts* had been one of my main goals in learning Yiddish; having achieved it, I was disheartened to discover how many of the newspaper's pages were filled each week with black-bordered death notices.

At a certain point, even the most innocuous, the least time-bound of events began to assume a dismal, depressing cast. One summer afternoon, a local organization dedicated to fostering Yiddish among young people (though "young," in the modern Yiddish context, is a relative proposition) sponsored a tour of the American Museum of Natural History. Some two dozen of us made our way through the museum's new exhibit on evolution, our guide explaining, in Yiddish, the finer points of what we were seeing. He was erudite, and the exhibit itself was fascinating, but the irony of the setting—all those extinct species gazing down at us Yiddishists from the walls—was nearly overpowering.

Yiddish is not a dead language akin to Sanskrit or Latin or Etruscan; it is instead a *dying* language, growing a little weaker each day. After a while,

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it becomes possible to discern the shrinking contours of the world one has chosen to inhabit. It's not just that the *Forverts* will, sooner or later, cease publication, or that the Folksbiene will eventually play to audiences whose members are all wearing translation headphones, its shows performed by actors who have learned their lines phonetically. The crisis in Yiddish today runs even deeper than this. There are fewer and fewer native speakers left to teach the classes that must suffice to bring the language to future generations.

A so-called Yiddish revival among young people has been widely chronicled in recent years; much is made of the fact that a growing number of American colleges now offer Yiddish courses. I once clipped a letter, written to a Jewish newspaper by an elderly Yiddishist, that declares, in part, "Yiddish is not dying. Nor will it die. Large segments of the younger Jewish generations are returning to their roots, to their beginnings—and are especially attracted to Yiddish." Letters like this one have been published, with slight variations, a hundred times over. However, the fact is that far more of these young people are attracted to klezmer music—which doesn't require Yiddish comprehension to be enjoyed—than to the study of Yiddish itself. As for the Yiddish classes, I have been in several of them, and while most are quite good, I've seen just how few of the students actually learn the language well enough to become fluent, to participate in any meaningful way in the maintenance (much less the advancement) of Yiddish culture. Still fewer anticipate teaching Yiddish to their children in the home—which is, of course, the only way languages are ever passed down through the generations. The very fact that Yiddish must depend on university courses for its survival is the strongest possible evidence of its endangerment.

Like any great language, of course, Yiddish will never die out entirely. It will continue to be read and spoken by people like me, who for one reason or another have taken an interest in it, and it will continue to be studied by scholars. Yes, the more separatist Hasidic sects will continue to use Yiddish as their primary language, but this Yiddish is, in an important sense, almost another language entirely. It does not partake of the glories of secular Yiddish culture, from poetry to theater to song; it has little interest in labor or women's history, such a crucial part of the Jewish immigrant experience, or in nonreligious newspapers like the *Forverts;* it has only contempt for the socialist (not to mention communist or anarchist) or even the Zionist politics of so many of its forebears. Hasidic students do not study secular Yiddish poets and political leaders in the same way that American children study Robert Frost or Martin Luther King. Whether or not the language itself continues to be spoken, the culture to which it once gave voice seems destined for oblivion.

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How I wish it were otherwise. For a time I entertained fantasies about my role in a great Yiddish revival—leading a new generation of Yiddish poets, or assuming editorship of the *Forverts*. This, I now see, is impossible: my classroom Yiddish will never be good enough (that I once had a poem printed in a small Yiddish journal is indicative only of the paucity of contemporary Yiddish poets), and, far more important, there is no longer an audience to serve.

There comes a point when one can't bear any longer to watch the suffering of the beloved, when one has the impulse to pull off the life-support systems and shout, "Enough! Yiddish has lived a long and full life. Now let it die in peace!" The joy that I once felt being in a class with other Yiddish students eventually became a kind of misery as I watched all our hesitations and stumbles and knew how tiny and ineffectual we were compared with the giants of the past. Yankev Glatshteyn and Anna Margolin were smart enough and courageous enough not to fool themselves about the onrushing mortality of Yiddish; nor should we, their remaining descendants.

But misery, finally, is not a proper response to love. Each of us must find a way to live with what we hold inside, to carry on and not forget. I have recently gone through a trove of Yiddish children's stories, primarily from Eastern Europe near the turn of century, some of which contain all the imagination and energy of stories by, say, Maurice Sendak. Most of them have never appeared in English, which means that future generations will not have the opportunity to enjoy them, and so I am now beginning work on translation.

"Here," we will say, handing our children a photograph, "you never knew her, but she was beautiful, and we loved her very much."

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Frog Doctor

RACHEL HADAS

i

At her seventy-fifth birthday party, Debbie
reminds her son John of something he said forty
years ago, in the summer of 1953.

The narrative of this shared memory is not simple.
Almost completely deaf from birth, the son
was hard to understand then and is now.

No one has ever understood him as well as his mother does,
did, will. She taught him to speak and to read lips;
and now, as then, when he looks at her he understands her.

And when she looks at him she understands
him with a leap and radiance
that clarify his speech for someone like me

who has known him forty years but still can barely
make out a word he says.
I think she would understand him if he were tongueless.

And a stone would understand her words to him.
He is forty-six. She is seventy-five.
What will he do when she dies?

My mother died last year. I am not deaf,
but who else understands me as she did,
who listens to me at that pitch of loving attention?

ii

The memory she is reconstructing for John and for us who listen,
many of whom were also in Rangeley that distant summer,
is of a frog pond. The seven-year-old boy

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was catching frogs from a small pond nearby
and putting them in a jar or a bucket of water
and one of the frogs he caught did not look well,

his mother is reminding him and us
in 1993 in Rochester, Vermont,
in a flowery meadow bordering a small pond

where friends and children and grandchildren splash.
And seeing the frog perhaps in difficulty
that summer of 1953 in Rangeley,

the child whose speech even his mother
had and still has to struggle to understand
looked at the flopping frog and cried

"Frog doctor! Frog doctor!"
She reminds him now of these two words, enunciating clearly
(perhaps she reminds him often);

and in the process reminds my sister and me, who are here,
reminds her other son and his wife and children,
reminds her daughter and her daughter's husband and baby.

This daughter was my best friend in 1953.
Every sunny morning all that summer
we played dolls on Doll Rock, and every day was sunny.

We all remember. The son, reminded, laughs.
Or does he laugh? His laughter was always strange,
a creaky or barking sound that you have to learn is laughter.

iii

That summer I was five.
And though the magic formula *frog doctor* has stayed
intact in my memory, what sweeps through me now

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with astonishing force is not the story it conjures,
nor the sense of these two words as two old friends,
nor even *How long, et cetera, forty years, et cetera.*

Not that I lack the sense of *oh, how long*—
how could I? but the ache
is swallowed up in wonder at sheer survival:

that this woman is still alive and can interpret for us,
that this mother is still alive and can remember,
alive and radiant with eagerness.

And as long as she remembers and passes on
this legacy of anecdote to her son
and to us the others gathered this afternoon

around a pail of water from the pond
(little frogs kick in the pail, waiting to be released),
it is not only that a fragment of what is my childhood, too,

is alive and struggling in the wet green grass,
but also that it is given to me to see and hear
love at work, caught in this pair of almost rhyming words,

love in the mother's retelling of her child's
imperious, altruistic call for help,
a call which was also a triumph of communication

(since every word he knew he knew through her,
her lips were sore from pronouncing and pronouncing),
words that had apparently been stored

all this time in my ears as well as his—
mine and my sister's and his sister's and brother's
ears, brains, hearts, wherever it is words wait.

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The Computable Cosmos of David Deutsch

OLIVER MORTON

When you meet him in his house on the outskirts of Oxford—and you're unlikely to meet him elsewhere, since he's something of a stay-at-home these days—the first things you notice about David Deutsch are that he has very big eyes and very messy habits. Behind a wall of rather unkempt trees and a gatepost that says 15a (the house itself is number 19, and this discordance is a source of endless bewilderment to cab drivers and their computerized dispatching systems) lies a modest home that could set international standards in slovenliness. There are shifting piles of paper everywhere, piles that are well past any conceivable file-this-someday stage, piles that spill over shelves and down walls and gather in sedimentary layers on the floor. In one room there is a forlorn vacuum cleaner. I know from observation that it moves from place to place over time, but the question of why it bothers remains a mystery. Amidst the chaos there are only two islands of order: the long workbench on which a small phalanx of computers is neatly arranged, and, nearby, a piano.

Now go next door. Not to the house next door—whatever number it may claim to be—but to the universe next door. You will find it indistinguishable: same mess, same islands of order, same David. There *is* a difference between the universes, in that some microscopic transaction has turned out differently, but you could search for all eternity and miss it. Keep on traveling in the same direction for long enough, though, and you will see change. The first hints will be meaningless. Things the order of

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which simply does not matter will be ordered slightly differently; the mess on the floor will be not quite what it was in the universe where you started off. The islands of order, though, will remain the same, and so will the identity of the householder. This would still be David Deutsch's house. Only if you were to travel on and on through the unnumbered universes to a house where there is no piano, or no computer, or even a computer made by someone other than Apple, would you be somewhere that's lived in by someone who isn't David Deutsch.

The idea that we live in one of an uncountably large—maybe infinite—family of parallel universes is one that everyone has heard of, but very few actually believe. Deutsch is one of the few. He did not originate the idea, but he is convinced by it. This is not because he has a penchant for the fantastic in and of itself; he wants no more fantasy in his working life than is absolutely necessary. But he has come to think that, in this case, the fantastic is indeed necessary in order to understand what is really going on. Deutsch seems more passionate about what reality is, about what actually exists and why, than almost any other scientist I can remember meeting. Some are content with elegant mathematical formalisms and carefully circumscribed experiments; others are intent not on the reality of the world but on how they can make it different with new technology. Deutsch just wants to understand what reality actually is, to know how physics and information meet in the making of the world.

It was on a search for such understanding that, in the 1980s, Deutsch came up with the idea of a quantum computer, one that, as he sees it, makes use of information in more than one universe. In the past six years, the quantum computer has gone from being a talking point among a small coterie of like-minded physicists to being one of the hottest topics of practical research. The technology holds out a real but distant promise of computers powerful enough to make Deutsch's beloved PowerMacs look like particularly well-crafted and user-friendly abaci. Universities, government agencies—notably the spooky ones—and even some corporations are working hard on the problems. Barely a month now goes by without *Science* or *Nature* carrying an announcement that the quantum computer's promise is coming closer to fruition. In one of the versions of the house we went through in paragraph two there may already be a Nobel Prize medal, probably hanging up on the message board in the hall, possibly pressed into service as a coaster for a coffee mug or buried by a pile of science fiction books that has collapsed onto the floor. There is not yet any such prize in the universes where this article is being published, but there could be soon.

There are two possible starting points for understanding where the idea of a quantum computer came from. One is at a party in Austin, Texas; the other is with a brief look at how quantum mechanics works. John Archibald Wheeler serves to join the two. Wheeler is one of the great

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characters of twentieth-century physics, a man whose willingness to rush around meeting everyone and listening to everything is legendary. He was a student of Niels Bohr's and a colleague of Einstein's, a pioneer of nuclear fission, and the man who coined the term *black hole.* He participated in and contributed to almost the whole history of twentieth-century physics, and has given more thought than most to its implications.

It was Wheeler's status as one of the grand old men of relativity—he is one of the three authors of the standard text on the subject—that first brought Deutsch to him. Deutsch had just left Cambridge University after three sparkling years as an undergraduate and a terrible year in the doldrums of a strange Cambridge tradition called "Part III Maths." The dons had told him that this was a sine qua non for future research: it turned out to be purgatorial. "It was a horrible thing, a mindless exam-oriented routine, just assimilating more and more techniques and skills and methods and jumping through hoops. I swore a terrible oath when I took my degree that I'd never take another exam in my life, but when they told me I had to do it, I didn't know enough to say piss off."

At the end of Part III, Deutsch didn't turn up for half of the examinations—having similarly ignored the courses they were based on, it didn't make much sense to go—and just scraped a pass. But in the time he wasn't working, he had found a group of kindred spirits under the tutelage of Dennis Sciama in Oxford, and had secured a place with them for the next year to study fundamental aspects of relativity and field theory. Deutsch was never interested in anything that wasn't fundamental, and at that stage, relativity seemed to him to underlie everything. In the summer of 1977 there was a hiatus between those last, ghastly Cambridge exams and the beginning of the new life in Oxford, so Deutsch decided to go to America and stay with relatives in Philadelphia. He had loved travel since winning a trip around the world as a schoolboy, longing not so much to see new sights as to talk to new people and learn how and what they thought. Once in Philadelphia, finding that Princeton was not far away, he rather boldly phoned up Wheeler to ask if they could meet.

"Wheeler said that would be fine, but he was on the move," Deutsch recalls. "However, if I could get to the airport at Portland, Maine, at seven in the morning on such and such a date, I could fly with him to Boston and we could have a chat on the plane. So I went there, stayed in a motel, and met him first thing at the airport. He said, 'Any friend of Dennis Sciama's is a friend of mine,' and I felt very proud to be admitted to this select company, and then he said to the waiter, 'I'd like a cup of coffee and another one for my colleague here,' and I thought, *Now I'm a colleague!* And we just talked nonstop while waiting for the airplane and on the airplane." When they arrived in Boston, Deutsch was eager to keep going as long as possible, but they were met by another student who'd been booked to accompany the great man on

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the next part of the journey. Thus does Wheeler meet everyone and hear everything.

But for all the rush, Wheeler takes things in. More than twenty years on, he remembers that first meeting with Deutsch and the impression it left: "He was so bright, so independent, so ready to go his own way. We walked around the airport for maybe an hour, walking and talking—which is a wonderful way to do things." A year later, having not communicated at all in the interim, Wheeler walked up to Deutsch in the dinner queue at a conference and asked him whether he wanted to come along with a group of Oxford postdocs on their way to join Wheeler at the University of Texas. Deutsch jumped at the chance.

In Austin, Texas—where Wheeler had moved because of mandatory retirement rules at Princeton—Deutsch began working with Bryce DeWitt, "the guru in my area," which at the time was the way quantum fields work in curved space-time. The more he thought about quantum theory in this context, the more fundamental it came to seem—and the harder to interpret. But conversations in Austin introduced Deutsch to an interpretation of the theory that looked so much better than any others that he decided it was probably true. Which brings things back to Wheeler. The interpretation Deutsch fell for was one that Wheeler had never actually believed, but which—generous and broad-minded in everything—he had helped a student to formulate in the 1950s.

The many strangenesses of quantum mechanics—the fact that things seem to be both here and there at the same time, the odd relationships between distant experiments, the ability to be a wave and a particle at once—basically come down to a simple problem: it takes a quart of quantum mechanical mathematics to describe a pint pot of reality. Quantum mechanics describes the world in terms of mathematical representations called Hilbert spaces. Rather than being limited to the three dimensions of height, depth, and breadth, a Hilbert space can be given as many dimensions as it needs, all notionally at right angles to each other. Each of these dimensions corresponds to an observable fact about the system that the Hilbert space is being used to describe. So describing a system quantum-mechanically requires a Hilbert space with as many dimensions to it as there are things to say about the system. Hilbert spaces are thus extremely large things—if in a rather abstract way.

Consider an electron spinning like a top. It can spin clockwise or counterclockwise, a pair of choices that corresponds to a two-dimensional Hilbert space like a city map. The actual spin of the electron is represented by a vector, or direction, within that space; let's say uptown means clockwise, crosstown counterclockwise. The problem is that external influences can twist the little arrow in Hilbert space so that it no longer points straight uptown or crosstown. It can end up pointing in all sorts of diagonal, catty-corner, north-by-northwest directions. But in observable

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reality there are still only two ways of spinning: clockwise and counterclockwise.

To make sense of this strange description, physicists use the angle between the direction that represents the state of the electron in Hilbert space and the street grid that defines uptown and crosstown. If the arrow is more or less pointing uptown, this means that, when measured, the electron's spin is likely to be clockwise; if the direction is more or less crosstown, then the odds are that it is counterclockwise. If it's at forty-five degrees to both, then quantum mechanics says that the result of your observation could go either way. Make the observation once and it will go one way, make it again and it will go the other—despite the fact that the Hilbert-space description is identical in both cases.

Niels Bohr, Wheeler's teacher, concluded that this meant observation was a very odd thing. He decided that when not observed, spinning electrons (and all sorts of other things) could indeed be in these diagonal states that correspond to no observable reality—or, more precisely, correspond to mixtures of mutually contradictory observable realities. When the arrow representing the electron is at forty-five degrees to both clockwise and counterclockwise, it means that the electron is in some way spinning both ways at once. The two states are in a "superposition" that is possible in Hilbert space, but not in the narrow confines of reality. Whenever observed, this superposition breaks down, and the representation in Hilbert space instantaneously jumps to one or other of the mundane alternatives: to clockwise or counterclockwise.

Bohr's "Copenhagen Interpretation" went against the basic principles of classical physics—that change is continuous, not abrupt; that two identical situations cannot have different outcomes; that the world is independent of its observers; that nothing is truly random. But it worked, in that it predicted terrifically well the frequency with which all sorts of things might be observed, and so it came to be accepted. After a while most physicists stopped worrying about it, though philosophers carried on. Wheeler was an exception, returning again and again to the question of how the system could "know" it was being observed and suddenly jump about accordingly. His own accounts of this place the conscious observer more or less at the center of the universe, denying reality to anything not perceived. But in the 1950s Wheeler helped Hugh Everett come up with another account.

Everett's idea was simple. The reason why there were possibilities in Hilbert spaces that didn't correspond to observable reality was that there were many observable realities, many different street grids that could be put on the same Hilbert space. In this view, to observe the quantum system is in effect to find out which of these universes you are in. Other people—other yous—doing the same measurement in other universes get different answers. What was a matter of chance—which observable state

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will the superposition decompose into?—becomes something subtly different: a matter of frequency. If 50 percent of the universes turn out a particular way, then there's a 50 percent chance that you are in one of that set of universes and that you'll get the appropriate answer when you make your measurement. But in the others it really does go the other way.

There are no sudden collapses brought about by the mere act of observation, and there is no role for random chance; from that point of view it's all quite sensible. And if Hilbert spaces are describing not just one universe but many, then they no longer seem to be so wastefully huge. But there is no denying that there are a lot more universes involved than there used to be, which is why Everett's way of looking at things became known as the "many worlds" interpretation. And to most people, invoking extra universes was too high a price to pay for neatness; they'd rather live with the seeming contradictions and keep repeating a mantra along the lines of, "That's just the weird way of the quantum world." David Deutsch, though, is not a man willing to live with contradictions.

The poor reception of "many worlds" was due to something more than its profligacy with universes. Everett seemed to take the randomness away from the particles and hand it to us. How could anyone know which universe he would end up in? It's like being in a garden of forking paths with no control over which one to follow. According to Deutsch, however, this problem is simply a misapprehension. While the original description of the idea by Everett and Wheeler seemed to imply that new universes were being created all the time, like branches from a tree, in fact all the universes are there already in a mille-feuille "multiverse." At every juncture, universes that were previously identical become different. The question "which universe will I end up in" is ill-founded—as far as any experiment you could undertake is concerned, you are already in all of them. (The physicist who joked that Everett's "many worlds" made high-stakes Russian roulette a good idea failed to understand this. All the versions of him faced the same one-in-six chance of dying.) You are already on every path in the garden that you ever could have been on. You always will be.

Once Deutsch began to understand the grace of the many-worlds idea, it pushed relativity away from the focus of his studies. The many-worlds view of a device called an interferometer held a particular fascination. All sorts of things can act as interferometers, but optical interferometers are probably the easiest to picture. In an optical interferometer, a beam of light is split in two with an angled mirror. Its daughter beams are sent along two different paths, bouncing off other mirrors, before being brought together again—at which point they make a pattern of light and dark stripes or spots. Before quantum mechanics, when light was simply a wave in the ether, the patterns were attributed to the waves in the two beams interfering with each other—reinforcing each

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other or canceling each other out, as the case might be. Quantum mechanics, though, sees light as little particles called photons, lots of them in a bright beam, very few in a dim one. And the dimmest of beams will create patterns in an interferometer. Even if there is only one photon in the system at a time, the pattern persists. That lone photon is still being interfered with. But by what?

The traditional way of understanding this is to say that in some strange way the photon can follow both paths through the interferometer at once. It will be in a superposition of the two path-following states and, as a result, will interfere with itself. But this outrages David Deutsch's realism. "What we mean by something being a particle," he says rather heatedly, "is that it's in one place and not another." The many-worlds interpretation is that in half the universes in which the interferometer is present, the photon follows one path, and in the other half it follows the other. And there is a slight porosity between the universes that allows the different photons in them to interfere with each other.

Normally, the different universes are strictly segregated. But interferometers are not normal; they are designed to bring universes together. The patterns at their ends are the same in universes that used to be different. Universes in which a particular photon took a left or a right turn end up identical anyway, because they interfere with each other. The pattern is the product of a number of universes differentiated and then realigned, of an aneurysm in reality opened and closed. It depends on all the different histories within it for its form.

If it produces a pattern dependent on the goings-on in many universes, then an interferometer is a way of passing information between universes. In fact, engineering the recombination of universes that have diverged is the only way of moving information from one universe to another. And, to cut to the chase, it is only by harnessing this information from other universes that you can build a quantum computer with more capabilities than a classical one. A quantum computer is an interferometer set up in such a way that the pattern that comes out at the end has to be the answer to a question.

It was after Deutsch had begun to get deep into the many-worlds view that, in the early 1980s, Wheeler held a small conference called "The Physics of Computers." Like Deutsch, Wheeler thrives on conversation. He likes to get people talking, and he likes to talk back: "How can I know what I think until I hear what I say?" is his motto. And he chooses great topics. "Wheeler has this magical talent for knowing what's important," says Deutsch, "and he realized that something that was going to link quantum theory with the theory of computation was in the air. So he staged this conference. It's hard for me to describe to people now how strange that title sounded then. It was as if he was having a conference

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on the physics of ducks. Why computers? Why not washing machines?"

It was not quite as strange to some of the other attendees as it was to Deutsch. A few physicists were already worrying about the link between physics, which is about things, and computational theory, which is about bits. The link involves very broad, basic questions. Must things that deal with bits always produce waste heat as they do so? Must the bits in a computation always flow in the same direction through the things doing the computing, or could the flow be reversed? One of the worrying physicists was Charles Bennett of IBM. He had recently shown that things dealing with bits did not, in fact, necessarily give off any heat. He had also devoted much thought to quantum mechanics and the ways in which it might allow messages to be sent secretly—a field called quantum cryptography. This works by producing separate particles that are described by a single Hilbert space and by using measurements on one to tell you something about the other. Deutsch was greatly impressed by a talk Bennett gave at Wheeler's workshop, and he sought him out at a party at Wheeler's house.

The conversation turned to ways of measuring complexity, in particular the idea that you can measure how complex a string of digits is by the length of the computer program needed to generate it. Deutsch, new to the idea, was sniffy; how a program computes things is determined by the "instruction set" in the computer it is written for, and different instruction sets do different sorts of things well. Surely it couldn't make sense that something as fundamental as complexity could change in response to something as arbitrary as an instruction set. "So I said, 'I think this complexity theory stuff is a load of rubbish,'" Deutsch recalls. "And Bennett said 'Oh?' very politely—he'd done quite a lot of work on it himself—'What makes you think that?' And I said, 'There's nothing fundamental in the theory of computation that tells you what the instruction set is.' Then Charlie says simply, 'The instruction set is physics.' I sort of gasped and took two steps backwards."

Deutsch had simply never seen the world this way before, with physics, mathematics, and computation all part of the same thing, all defining each other's complexities. The instruction set Bennett was referring to was the set of basic rules about what things can do—rules that define what is local, what is nonlocal, how particles can interact, things like that. This was the sort of instruction set implicit in the work of Alan Turing, the founder of the study of computation, who had first realized that to understand computation you had to be able to imagine it being done by a machine. Implicit in the way Turing talked about this machine—a "universal computer"—was the idea that the physics involved was the classical physics of billiard balls and Isaac Newton, not quantum mechanics. No one in the field had ever really questioned that. But Deutsch did. If complexity and computation were real things and not mathematical abstractions, they had to be described in the best language for describing reality,

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and that was quantum mechanics. This insight set him on a new intellectual path, the one he has been following ever since. He took the first step in style. Catching his breath, he snapped back at Bennett, "If the instruction set is physics, then you guys are using the wrong physics."

Over the following years, Deutsch set about reformulating Turing's original paper on the theory of computation, substituting "the right physics" for Newtonian precepts. He translated the paper into the language of quantum mechanics, purging it of all its hidden assumptions about the classical world. Bennett remembers watching with interest, but without great expectations: it seemed more or less certain to him that Deutsch was going to find a more complex and possibly more complete way of restating what was already known. But when Deutsch eventually produced a mathematical description of a universal quantum computer, he found that he now had a way to prove certain things that Alan Turing had merely assumed. What's more, he had a way to do some types of computation that no Turing machine could ever manage. Bennett's intuition had been wrong—and Bennett was one of the first to start working on the new possibilities that Deutsch had turned up. Computational theory was built on the idea that all computers were Turing machines—or at least were doing things that Turing machines could do. If there was something a quantum computer could do that a Turing machine could not, that was big news in the admittedly rather small world of theoretical computational physics.

The secret of the added potential that Deutsch saw in his mathematical description of the quantum computer lay in the superposition of states. Instead of dealing with just ones and zeros—bits—his description deals with superpositions of ones and zeros: what are now known as qubits. This system of superimposed states has to be kept almost perfectly isolated from everything around it. It is essentially an interferometer, and if any information gets out of an interferometer, all the beautiful patterns fall apart. Yet at the same time, the components within this interference between universes must, very gently, without disturbing the overall superposition, be manipulated. Put in the right order, these manipulations—imagine shifting mirrors back and forth along lines of light—make up a logical process. This is the "quantum algorithm" by means of which the computation gets done. Throughout the process, the different universes are interfering with each other, modifying each other. The universes are not literally parallel, like lines that never meet. They are interconnected. They do not add to each other's power. They multiply it.

Other people had talked of using quantum mechanical systems to process information. One was a researcher at Argonne National Laboratory, Paul Benioff. Another was the more famous Richard Feynman, one of the most gifted physicists of the century and another pupil of

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Wheeler's. Sensing, like Wheeler, that something linking computers and quantum physics was in the air, Feynman had pointed out that in quantum mechanics even quite simple systems could be far too difficult for any practical computer model to deal with. Remember, the Hilbert space required to represent something has as many dimensions as there are measurable states of the system. If you have a particle that has no characteristic worth measuring except the direction of its spin, then its Hilbert space has two dimensions. If you have ten such particles, there are 1,024 dimensions in the Hilbert space corresponding to measurements along the lines of "up, down, up, up, down, down, down, down, up, up." If you have twenty particles, there are more than a million questions that measurement can settle. And each question is a whole dimension in the system's Hilbert space.

In short, even for a measly few atoms, Hilbert spaces are really, really big—too big for classical computers to navigate their way around. Feynman suggested that maybe computers could be helped in the task of modeling such quantum systems if they were given little quantum devices that could act as part of the model. But he didn't go the whole hog and see the possibilities of a fully quantum computer, one that could cope with the sizes of Hilbert spaces for the simple reason that it operated in a vast Hilbert space itself.

In 1984 or 1985 (Deutsch is not very good with dates, and Feynman is dead), Wheeler sent Deutsch to meet Feynman at Caltech and tell him about the quantum computer. "It was a great moment in my life," Deutsch recalls. "I'd never met anyone like him. He had an incredible problem-solving ability that I'd never seen before. When I came to the proof that the quantum computer is more powerful than the Turing machine, I started writing something up on the blackboard. He was already very ill at the time, he'd had his stomach removed and all sorts of horrible things done to him, and he was sitting there slumped in an armchair, but he suddenly jumped up and said 'Wait!' He grabbed the chalk out of my hand, told me to sit down, and in a couple of minutes he worked out on the blackboard the proof I'd just spent several weeks on. I don't know anyone else who could have done it.

"There's this fantasy world in some books by Piers Anthony where everyone has a magic talent for doing something perfectly. For some people it's something very simple, like being able to move a teacup from one place to another, while other people have the ability to kill anyone they think of. The one with the most powerful talent becomes king. Feynman reminded me of a person from this fantasy whose talent was physics. I don't normally believe in such things; I was completely skeptical of the stories I'd heard about Feynman before meeting him. But they were true—it was just magical."

Thus blessed, the work was published, and Deutsch started to talk

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about it more widely. Not everyone was as enthusiastic as Feynman. Take Rolf Landauer. Landauer's insistence that the physical basis of information must always be taken into account in information theory was the foundation of the approach to computers that Deutsch was now involved in. He was Bennett's boss at IBM's research labs, and he invited Deutsch to give a presentation to his research group. Deutsch did so—feeling rather spoiled, he says, because they put him up in a hotel, not a dormitory—and Landauer latched on to a key problem: error correction.

Landauer's objection was a powerful and refined one, based on thermodynamics and the nature of quantum processes, but it boiled down to something like this. Error correction is a necessary part of computing; it can't be done if you don't know where the errors are; and in quantum computing you can't know where the errors are, because as soon as you look for them you damage the calculation beyond repair. The quantum system has to be kept isolated until it brings forth its answer. If you try to sniff out an error, you'll end up with a random snapshot of what was going on in some small fraction of the universes involved, rather than the answer. This would not be a good thing.

The criticism showed Landauer's practical bent; his success came from thinking resolutely about what is practical, using real physics, and what isn't. Deutsch's failure to be unduly perturbed by it reflects his relative lack of interest in technology. He had a sketchy, back-of-the-envelope way of dealing with errors that was good enough to convince him that error correction wasn't a significant theoretical problem, even if it was a huge problem in practice; and he wasn't that interested in quantum computers as technological artifacts. Nor, at that stage, was there really any reason to be. It would be incredibly hard, if possible at all, to keep a quantum computer's qubits isolated from the rest of the world in the required manner. And though a quantum computer might do things that interested information theorists, it wasn't clear that it could, in practice, do anything that would interest anyone else.

The first quantum algorithms were very simple affairs, logical parlor tricks of no real value, however many universes they were carried out in. But new algorithms started to be developed, and new people started to do the developing. Deutsch thought this was wonderful. Conversation and criticism are still what he thrives on, though today he gets them through the Internet rather than through traveling; he is rarely to be seen outside Oxford. The ensuing decade-long conversation about the sorts of quantum computing that might be possible was a joy to him. He remembers one of the early breakthroughs with particular delight. A physicist called Richard Jozsa, who had come to Oxford to talk to him, was walking him through some new results. "I said, 'Hang on a minute, it looks right, but doesn't it violate my 'no-go' theorem?' and he said, 'Yes, it does. That

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theorem wasn't true.' And I said, 'Oh. I see.' And my first thought was 'that's great,' not only because there was a door opening to a whole load of new results, but because there was a way of looking at it that was much better than my way of looking at it."

The "no-go" theorem had said that all sorts of mathematical operations would be beyond quantum computers. Its demise was liberating. By the time of the first quantum computing conference, in Turin in 1994, it was clear that manipulations of qubits—in the forms of spinning atoms, or reflected photons, or whatever—could do some quite interesting things. There was a widespread feeling that something impressive was in the offing. Sure enough, shortly afterward Deutsch received an e-mail from someone he didn't know, with a message that he could scarcely believe. He got in touch with Umesh Vazirani, a theorist at Berkeley who had become very interested in quantum computation and was using it to reformulate complexity theory, and he asked if there was a mistake he wasn't seeing. There wasn't. A researcher named Peter Shor had discovered a way for quantum computers to find smaller numbers that can be multiplied together to produce a particular large number—that is, to find that large number's factors. This may sound simple, but if the numbers you start with are big enough, finding their factors is really difficult; and what's worse, there's a law of diminishing returns. Make the numbers to be factorized just a little bit bigger, and the time taken to do the trick gets a great deal longer.

Shor's algorithm simply didn't have this problem. The bigger the numbers, the more universes it made use of—hardly any diminishing returns at all. And that had real practical importance. The fact that normal computers find factoring large numbers hard is basic to the making and breaking of coded messages. If quantum computing made the factorization of very big numbers easy—or if there were even a vague chance that it might do so in thirty years—then quantum computing was important. Intelligence agencies like the United Kingdom's Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) and the United States' National Security Agency (NSA), reputedly the world's largest user of computer power, started to get seriously interested, as did all sorts of other organizations.

For nonspooks, the attraction came from the sheer power of the result. Using Shor's algorithm, a computer that consisted of a few thousand qubits could factorize numbers 250 digits long. If that doesn't sound impressive, then you've forgotten how big Hilbert spaces are. A small increase in the size of the system it is describing leads to an exponential increase in the number of dimensions in the Hilbert space. If you analyze the number of bits that take part in such a calculation, you find that you need 10 to the 500th power. That is a truly big number. If every subatomic particle in the visible universe contained within it another universe-worth

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of subatomic particles, there still wouldn't be anything like 10 to the 500th of them.

It's this sort of massive power that makes Deutsch treat quantum computation as proof that the many-worlds universe—the multiverse—is real. The algorithm is mathematically valid. The computers to implement it are theoretically possible. So there could in fact be a computer to do such a calculation, a calculation that requires far more processing power than there is matter in the visible universe. To Deutsch, the only straightforward way to understand this is to say that the hardware you see is just part of a far greater entity spread across the multiverse—each of its parts twisting different versions of the data through different intermediate steps in ways that affect all the others, and the whole thing tied together by the laws of interference.

After Shor, quantum computing exploded. In the excitement, various potentially practical schemes to cope with error correction were developed quite quickly. For smallish calculations, the problem turns out to be quite similar to quantum cryptography over a noisy line, which Charles Bennett had already studied. Indeed, there's a sense in which quantum cryptography is a simple form of computing, one that does almost nothing to qubits but pass them around. Deutsch likes to point to quantum cryptography as the simplest example of something a quantum computer can do that a Turing machine can't. Bennett has reservations about tying the two fields quite that closely together.

At the same time, ways to do actual quantum computing started to become feasible—techniques for isolating things from the rest of the universe, but at the same time keeping enough control to manipulate them. The trapping of ions in laser beams is one such technology. That of spinning large numbers of similar nuclei in magnetic fields is another, and much easier to do (you can use magnetic resonance systems like those now found in labs and hospitals all over the world), though it's hard to see how to build such systems bigger than about 20 bits. The challenges are still enormous—stopping information from leaking out prematurely is a terrible problem—and it will be a few years before a machine equipped with the Shor algorithm tackles a problem that would tax an eight-year-old. But most in the field now think that day will come—and that a full-fledged code cracker may be not that far behind.

Every month brings new ideas for implementations, new algorithms to implement, new experimental devices. Recently there have been suggestions for isolating components in silicon systems so thoroughly that they could work as parts of a quantum computer without information leaking out. The latest work suggests that, contrary to earlier beliefs, it will even be possible to equip these machines with memories. In a few decades a quantum computer more powerful, not just than any of today's computers but than *all* of today's computers, could become a reality.

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Deutsch is happy about all that, and delighted that Oxford is one of the leading centers for such research. This is due not so much to his presence there, since he is no sort of academic empire builder, but to the presence of Artur Ekert, a laser physicist who became intrigued by the idea of quantum computing early on and decided to stay in research rather than head off into banking, as he had previously intended. Deutsch may even get involved in building something. But devices are not his main concern, even now that they seem possible. He's still fascinated by many-worlds, and by the deeper, slower-running flow of speculation about how information and physics fit together that lies beneath the surface rush of quantum computation.

One corollary of Deutsch's ideas is that there are really two types of information. One type, very like the classical conception of information, resides within universes and differentiates them from each other. "We can define our universe as the set of information storage places between which we can arbitrarily exchange information," says Deutsch. A wonderful illustration of this view comes from the thermodynamics of black holes, a subject dear to John Wheeler's heart. When something falls down a black hole—that is, when it goes somewhere from which it can never come back—all its information is lost; Elvis has left the universe. To balance this loss of information, the black hole's entropy grows by an exactly equivalent amount.

The second type of information lives between universes. Only in superpositions can one find the qubits in which such information is stored and processed. And even then, "accessible" puts the case rather too strongly. Leaving aside the practical problems of holding a number of atoms in a state of quantum superposition while manipulating them pair-by-pair, there are also fundamental limits on access laid down by the laws of quantum mechanics.

"Those incredibly numerous intermediate results in Shor's algorithm"—the ones that would exhaust the matter of the visible universe—"really exist in the multiverse, but you can't read them off," says Deutsch. "The laws of quantum mechanics forbid that. You can only read off one small aspect of that huge amount of information; and even that small aspect isn't a matter of choice. You can't say, 'I want to read the first three bits.' It's just not allowed. All you can read are the combinations allowed by the laws; the cleverness of designing quantum algorithms is to make the allowed bits that we can read the useful bits that we want."

This practical challenge leads to a profound intellectual shift: a reinterpretation of the laws of quantum mechanics as the rules for accessing and processing qubits. Quantum theory is not just being used to look at questions about information; it is being recast as a theory about information. And that reformulation fits with a view, shared by many in the field, that computation is not just something that we do with the universe.

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It may be something the universe does itself. This may be the link between being in the world and understanding it, between following a physical law—falling down, say—and calculating how that physical law is followed. It's almost as if the law is a result of the way the universe itself does some similar calculation.

Charles Bennett points out that this idea is hardly new; you can trace it back to the Marquis de Laplace, in the late eighteenth century, and his idea of an intelligence that could understand the whole universe through its laws. But it does seem to be finding a new form. Still gripped by Bohr's notion of the role of consciousness and observation in quantum mechanics, John Wheeler talks of all physics coming out of information, of "its coming from bits." Rolf Landauer used to talk of all information being fundamentally physical. These are views that come out of different traditions and mean very different things to those who hold them, but Landauer saw them as similar attempts to get away from the idea that mathematics and natural law have some strange ability to impose themselves on the physical world from the outside. Both stem from a search for some self-consistent way to understand a real physical universe entirely on its own terms, for a physical understanding of what it is to follow a physical law. "I'm just convinced that there's a marvelous simplicity under the whole show," says Wheeler, "and when it comes out we'll all say to each other, 'Oh, it's so beautiful—how could we have been so stupid for so long?'"

How to extract this truth "isn't remotely clear," Landauer told me with a laugh in 1998. But taking quantum physics and information seriously looks likely to be a big help. Deutsch points out that there are some things about quantum physics that make it intrinsically information-friendly. Information needs definition, and the quantum world, with discrete values rather than continua, provides that definition in a way the classical world never could. A universe in which there was nothing but the classical would not have semiconductors, or neurons, or, for that matter, Turing machines. All classical systems, even the celestial mechanisms that so fascinated Laplace, eventually evolve into chaos. Information systems require ratchets, things that make it easy to stay in a stable state once you have reached it. Classical physics has no perfect ratchets; quantum physics does. All certainties that ones will remain ones and zeros zeros stem, in the end, from quantum mechanics.

Another aspect of friendliness to computation comes from logic gates. In the classical world you have to do a lot of engineering to make something act as a logic gate; most things you do to a piece of silicon don't make it into any sort of silicon chip. In the quantum world almost any manipulation of a system that doesn't destroy the superposition of states can be treated as a gate in a logic circuit. It's as though—and Deutsch

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shies away from the phrase but can't help using it, if only as shorthand—the quantum world were designed for information processing.

Deutsch's view of the link between following physical laws and doing computations is that being computable is a basic aspect of the universe. Everything that can exist, including everything in all the quantum worlds, can be computed—simulated, in fact—by a quantum computer. The impossible and the uncomputable are the same thing. In the long run, Deutsch thinks, this principle of universality will come to be seen as a cornerstone of physics, like the principle of conservation of energy. It will be second nature for theorists to fit all their speculations to the idea.

Don't wait impatiently for such speculations to make sense, though, and don't expect David Deutsch to create them. He's straightforward about the fact that, contrary to the stereotype of the brilliant, other-worldy physicist, he is not hit by new revelations. When he talks about moments of "flabbergasting" insight, it's in the context of criticisms and novelties brought to him by others, like Bennett or Jozsa. He is interactive, a conversationalist; it was conversation with new voices that he used to look for in his traveling days, and it is conversation on the Internet that keeps him intellectually fresh today. He no longer limits his conversations to physics, as once he did. His meditations on the multiverse have led him in new philosophical directions. His first book, *The Fabric of Reality* (1997), was a bravura attempt to pull all of these ideas together, to clarify some of the patterns that life and thought make across the multiverse. What would be preserved across the multiverse, what would not be? Some processes, he thinks—rational thought, evolution, scientific inquiry—produce things that are stable over many, many universes.

While complex patterns created by processes without purpose would look increasingly different in increasingly distant universes, complex patterns of knowledge and biology might be preserved. Criticism and evolution, Deutsch thinks, act in similar ways to weed out the slightly different forms of life and knowledge that arise as initially identical universes diverge. "In another universe the individual bits of stuff in this room would be in different places, and the identities of individual bits of stuff might change. But the fact that *that*"—pointing to a vast black screen perched on the other side of the room—"is a Panasonic and not a Sony won't change, because I very carefully picked that TV after checking out all the alternatives." Reality is ruled by reason.

Deutsch's fascination with rational epistemology and the growth of knowledge has a practical side, too. His hatred of coercive education—he refuses ever to lecture in a context where his words might be the subject of eventual examination—is not based entirely on his own deep hatred of exams. He attaches great moral and intellectual importance to the refusal to accept truth simply on authority, which has been shown to be necessary for the growth of scientific knowledge; and he can't bear to

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see the possibility of refusal denied to children. He sees traditional schooling as flying in the face of all that is reliably known about how to build knowledge, and he works with a small pressure group, "Taking Children Seriously," to put this point across. A similar attitude underlies his love of Macs—designed for people to use freely and intuitively—and his hatred of Microsoft.

Like many similarly gifted thinkers, Deutsch has a touch of Peter Pan in him. (Charles Bennett, for example, calls meetings to order by clapping his hands together just in front of his open mouth, producing an exhalation-free whooping noise fascinating enough to make six-year-olds of us all). Deutsch's sweetness, messiness, and inability to tolerate the unfair are the attributes of a child, one who craves order but hates its imposition. His interest in radical education reform may seem odd for a single, childless academic working all but single-mindedly at the very roots of physics; but it's true to the core of what it is to be David Deutsch, the aspect of his character that I can imagine spreading out farthest across the multiverse. It is common to the countless all-but-indistinguishable-Davids nearby and to the many more almost-Davids-satisfied-with-Sony-widescreens a bit farther off. It would extend even to the sort-of-Davids-who-still-travel and the barely-Davids-who-tidy-things-up. And it is the thing that differentiates all of the above from the fake-Davids-who-invigilate-exams and the pseudo-Davids-who-enjoy-the-maths-for-its-own-sake-and-bugger-the-physical-meaning. This defining aspect is his urgent need to be free to talk seriously about the world and find out how it really is, a freedom he simply could not want for himself without wanting it for everyone. He doesn't wish to conquer nature or pluck its secrets. With the poignant doggedness of a studious child, he just wants to get beyond "because I say so" and learn the truth.

After he mentioned Wheeler's special talent for spotting an idea whose time has come, and Feynman's special talent simply for doing physics, I asked Deutsch what his own special talent might be. He smiled, embarrassed, and then looked at me, his big eyes magnified, as always, by his glasses. "I don't know if this is talent or coincidence or what, but my career has uniformly been about understanding existing theories rather than creating anything new. None of what I've done has overturned anything. It's been a matter of saying, 'Hey, look, guys, if that's the theory, then it has these and these consequences, and no one's noticed before.' And sometimes people say, 'Nah, nah, it doesn't.' But then all I have to do is point out that I'm not saying, 'Here's this new theory of mine.' I'm just saying, 'Here's this theory of *yours* and it has these consequences.' So maybe that's what my talent is. Taking things seriously."

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A Dialogue Between Poetry and Grief

ROBERT PINSKY

(For the first anniversary of the embassy bombings at Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, August 7, 1998)

O Death, called mighty and dreadful, be not proud:
For you are slave to Chance and desperate men.
But death is no person. No scytheman in a shroud
Injured these souls that will not breathe again
But people killed them, in some calculus of pride

Or shame or policy or fanatic will
Arguing desperation. And as to Chance,
It is our element: natural, invisible,
We breathe it now as we step the civic dance
As those we celebrate did, till Chaos fell.

How sleep the brave, by Honor consigned to rest
Blessed by their country. Not one country but three,
Two called "host countries." English *host* and *guest*
Were once the one same word, roofed courtesy
Provisional and dual, word that expressed

Wariness along with welcome, a recognition
That I am as strange to you as you to me.
Their valor we honor was in that intricate mission
Of daily life—the world like an embassy
Or marketplace of gingerly negotiation

Among us ghost-souls in the bargaining place
of work, jokes, gossip, where small and large desires
Contend and trade: the humdrum clangor of peace.
How sleep these brave? The unredemptive fires
Absolve them. Three countries try to inscribe their loss.

Is death without memorial, and absolute?
Now as in myths, the dead are strange—feet bare,
In hats of woven birch, they walk to the flute.
Arlene; Mohammed; Julian; Khalil . . . strange power
In names of the innocent: Song. Spell. Salute.

Robert Pinsky was the United States Poet Laureate and Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress from 1997–2000. His latest book is *Jersey Rain.*

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Like Hyenas, Like Baudelaire, Like the Angel of the Resurrection

ANDREW HUDGINS

If Christ had refused to touch the lepers and to speak with the Samaritan woman, the former would have remained sick and the latter sinful. The Christian is supposed to be *attracted to rotting flesh, like hyenas, like Baudelaire, like the angel of the Resurrection.*

—Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa

When I awoke—or was awakened—I saw, beyond my feet, a man formed out of light. He stepped through the Sheetrock walls of my father's house as if, like water, they offered some slight resistance to his passage, and he stared in my direction. At the center of cold light, his bright face darkened with a sorrow beyond expression, but I was too afraid to pity him.

I know my folklore, and the tales are inconclusive: some ghosts will kill you with the slightest touch, while others bear messages of love and warning across the void. Though I was afraid, I knew this ghost might be the only one I would ever see. If it had come to tell me something, I wanted to hear it. I sought the ghost's eyes; then, frightened, I looked away. But after I turned my head, I held in my mind's eye the memory of what I had seen, and I pored over the afterimage as if it were a snapshot, studying the ghost's sharp cheekbones and its eyes, haunted—what other word is there?—with what I took to be centuries of solipsistic heartbreak. For a lost love? A disturbed grave? An unavenged murder? An unexpiated

Andrew Hudgins, Distinguished Research Professor at the University of Cincinnati, is the author of five books of poetry, most recently *Babylon in a Jar*. His last contribution to the SCHOLAR was "Half-Answered Prayers" (Spring 1999).

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guilt? I studied my memory of the ghost until I understood that it wasn't looking at me. It was trying to see the room, the walls, the furnishings, the people in the room. It wasn't trying to see anything in particular; it was just straining to *see.* Though it breathed, it did not breathe the same air I breathed, and though alive, so alive it pulsed, it did not know I was in the room. I turned around to look at it once more, just in time to see it drift, still facing me, back through the Sheetrock. I thought, then, that through my act of courage in turning to look at it, I had vanquished the ghost. But how could I have vanquished something that didn't know I was there? The ghost was just the past, though not my past, and a future that, so far, has not been mine. That is what I think now.

I was out of work—"between jobs" was the euphemism I insisted on—and back living with my father in Alabama, eating his food and sleeping in the bed I'd left behind twelve years before, when I graduated from college. To make myself feel better about this arrangement, I was painting his house, and I was doing an obsessively good job of it. Sunburned and sore, dripping sweat in the seething July heat, I scoured the house with an inch-and-a-half scraper. I sanded the old paint, feathering the edges smoothly into the raw wood. I washed the walls with trisodium phosphate, then with fungicide. I gouged out the old dry caulk with a putty knife and a screwdriver, recaulked, primed, painted a first coat, painted a second coat. A good job. And when my father came out to help, I said, "Nope, forget it. This is my job." But since he had to buy the paint and all the tools except the ladder—brushes, scraper, sandpaper, caulk, and caulking gun—I doubt he saved much money.

Every second day, all summer long, my father said to me, with forced casualness, "I'm leaving now. You want to come along?"

Three times one week, four times the next, swapping off with another man from his church, my father drove to a small house on the rough north side of Montgomery and helped a woman in her early twenties whose husband, a rodeo cowboy, was paralyzed from the neck down. The couple had been married for three months when a Brahma bull rolled over his legs and spine, crushing them. At their house, my father lifted the crippled cowboy off the bed, and while the man's wife snatched the yellowed sheets off the mattress, my father held the wizened body in his arms, an intimacy he had not shared with anyone since my mother's death ten years before. Holding the man in his arms, he forced himself to talk about the weather, football, local elections, and how darned expensive coffee was these days. The woman snapped a fresh sheet on the mattress, and my father, a laconic man exhausted more from the effort at conversation than from the lifting, half lay, half dropped the broken cowboy back on the bed.

I have constructed this scene out of the few disparate details my father

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told me. To my shame, I never went with him. When he asked, "You want to go with me?" I said, "Do you need help?"

He hesitated, disappointed. "No," he said, "I don't need help."

"Need" was the word we were negotiating. If he had needed my help, or even if he had stretched a point and merely said he did, I would have gone with him.

But since he didn't, I said, "Look at me. I'm covered with paint." Or "I need a shave." Or "Janelle and I are going to a movie." But usually I just said the simple truth: "If you don't need me, I don't want to go."

Because I felt guilty, and with good reason, I didn't want to be there when he got home. I'd phone Janelle and we'd grab supper at Shoney's, see a movie, or walk around the mall. Three or four times we drove out to Hank Williams's grave. Fans had chiseled souvenirs from the concrete cowboy hat and the concrete guitar adorning the grave. They had even broken off parts of the headstone. I was most tempted myself by the sign put up by Hank Williams, Jr. (better known as Bocephus): "Please don't chip pieces off my Daddy's grave." Mostly, though, Janelle and I just drove around town and talked, talked, talked.

Then, because she was going to law school and living at home after the breakup of her marriage, we'd drive back to her mom's house and make out in the dark living room like teenagers.

From time to time, we checked into the Motel 6 out on the Atlanta Bypass. When we entered the room, I always turned the TV on and then turned it off. Nerves, I think it was nerves. Easing our bodies against each other, we could almost hear each other thinking, "Why can't I love you? I should love you. I'm trying to love you." It was the sort of love you sometimes make the last time you sleep with an old lover, when the long knowledge of how to please someone is rejuvenated in sorrow. Janelle had a strawberry birthmark on her belly. When she was a girl, she'd drawn that mark on her dolls with a red felt-tip pen. It was shaped a little like Florida, and when I kissed it I'd say, "Florida! I'm kissing Florida. Miami to Jacksonville! Jacksonville to Panama City!" She squirmed beneath my kisses, and laughed her deep throaty laugh, which I truly and unhesitantly loved. Coming from such a short blonde woman, that earthy laugh always delighted me, provoking me to do sillier and sillier things so I could hear it. Once or twice that laugh enticed me to say the words that might have truly damaged our lives: "I love you." But she just said, "No, you don't," and laughed that spectacular laugh.

"Bull riding!" I said now. "What do you expect when you strap your ass to a Brahma bull? I mean, what's the best thing you can expect to happen? That you don't get killed?"

"Why does he always ask you to go with him?" Janelle asked, meaning my father. "He doesn't really need your help, does he?"

"Nah. He's not young, but he can still hoist an eighty-pound paralytic.

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And it's not like he'd even let me do the lifting if I did go with him. He just wants me to go."

"But why?"

"Because he wants to spread around the misery?"

"Ha, ha," she said, and stuck out her tongue at me. Then, seriously, she said, "I think he wants to show you service and the suffering of others. He wants to show you faith in Christianity."

"Yeah, that's what I think too."

Janelle loved this subject as much as I did. Because her mother was beginning chemotherapy for ovarian cancer, Janelle had locked in on my father and the crippled man as a way to avoid talking about her. Or as a way *of* talking about her. When I asked, "How's your mom doing?" she'd say, "Fine," or "She's feeling a little puny today," or "Let's talk about something else."

"Your dad, he really believes that stuff, doesn't he?" she asked now, rolling out of my arms and reaching for her clothes.

"Yeah. Yeah, he does."

"I don't. When I saw my dad pushed out of his bedroom on a gurney with an oxygen mask clamped on his face, I could see he was going to die, and I knew right then and there I didn't believe in God and I never would."

"How old were you?" I asked.

"Thirteen."

I waited for a few moments, watching her pull on her jeans and T-shirt, before I said, "There are a lot of logical reasons not to believe in God, but that's not one of them. Everybody dies."

"Not at forty-two, they don't," she said, and grabbed her sandals off the bedside table. "Come on. Get dressed and let's drive down to the river and see what it smells like today."

She was right, I think, about my father. He did want to show me faith in action. But while he wanted me to see a morality play, it wasn't one with him as the hero, the suffering servant ministering to the needs of the downtrodden, the impoverished, the crippled. I was the oldest of four boys, the other three married, with good jobs and kids, while I was back living with him, divorced, out of work, no retirement, no medical benefits, and disappearing at all hours of the night to spend time with a divorcée. He wanted me to see myself as the cowboy, a Christian who could depend on the love and care, the simple duty, of his fellow believers. If I couldn't make the leap of faith to belief, perhaps I would at least embrace the concrete benefits of Christian community as a sort of insurance policy. Once I was in the fold, faith might follow.

This way of converting unbelievers has an honorable history. In the third century, the barbarians were baffled and the Romans perplexed by the devotion the Christians showed to the sick and the dying. Between a

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fourth and a third of the population of the Roman Empire died in the Cyprian plagues. In Alexandria the figure may have been as high as two-thirds. When the plagues struck the densely packed tenements of Rome, why didn't the followers of Christ take to the forests with everyone else? The Romans consulted their oracles, but the priests had died or fled. The temples filled with the dead because there was no one to bury them. The Christians, because their religion demanded it, stayed and fed sick fellow Christians, stripped their bedding, burned it, mopped their sweat-drenched brows, drained their pustules, and, as was often necessary, gave the dead a proper burial.

Through the fifteen years of the Cyprian plague—fifteen years!—the Christians ministered to people suffering from vomiting, diarrhea, deafness, blindness, and unquenchable thirst. When the pagans saw this, they converted in huge numbers, some moved by the Christians' selfless love, some by the desire to be nursed if they fell ill themselves and buried if they did not recover.

Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, welcomed the plague for the "schooling and test":

> How suitable, how necessary it is that this plague and pestilence, which seems horrible and deadly, searches out the justice of each and every one and examines the minds of the human race; whether the well care for the sick, whether relatives dutifully love their kinsmen as they should, whether masters show compassion for their ailing slaves, whether physicians do not desert the afflicted. . . . Although this mortality has contributed nothing else, it has especially accomplished this for Christians and servants of God, that we have begun gladly to seek martyrdom while we are learning not to fear death. These are trying exercises for us, not deaths; they give to the mind the glory of fortitude; by contempt of death they prepare for the crown.

If my father's repeated invitation was a "schooling and test"—and in the Southern Baptist Church I learned to see every moment of every day as a spiritual test—I was failing. Perhaps because I was partially dependent on my father that summer, I could not bear to see a man who was completely dependent on other people, on their good graces, their love, their charity. Charity, though simple in theory, is tense and complicated in practice.

During my senior year of college, I had read for a blind woman, and through all four years of college I stayed overnight with a bedridden old man. Every morning I lifted the warm bedpan, which stank of ammonia, from between his flabby legs, emptied it, rinsed it, and replaced it. Though I was paid very little for these jobs—five dollars a night for Mr. Henderson—I was paid, and that transaction kept their afflictions and their humanity at a distance. The passing of money from their hands to

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mine gave them power. It moved them into the category of "boss," and while I may like or dislike my bosses, I do not identify with them.

In charity, the lines of power are more confused. My mother had grown up poor in a Georgia mill town during the Depression. Whenever she and I heard on the radio or TV about, say, a church collecting shoes for poor children at Christmas, she'd nod approvingly, but sometimes, after nodding, she'd turn to me and say, her voice fierce, "Don't you ever take charity from anybody, do you hear me? If you do, I'll come back from my grave and I'll haunt you for the rest of your natural life. You stand on your own two feet!"

This was a poser. If giving shoes to the poor was very good but accepting those shoes was very bad, I would earn my goodness by making other people bad.

As I grew older, the psychological quandary turned into a philosophical one. In my teens, teachers and ministers repeatedly told me, "The whole point of life is serving others." I didn't believe it. The teachers and ministers were working at jobs. They were paid for what they did, and it was easy to see that for almost all of them I was part of their work, not an object of their profound and loving care. But even in the abstract I could not work out the unexplained logic of their assertion. If I selflessly served others in all ways large and small, what ultimately was the point of having a self? Did God give us each a self so we could deny it? Maybe. As a test. But it seemed unlikely. And wasn't the cherished platitude that "you get back more from serving others than you ever give" just a devious way of saying "me first"—a life philosophy whose narcissism and solipsism were so viscerally contemptible that they required no argument from me to be refuted?

I was frozen between two unsatisfactory choices. All I could see was the poverty of each way of thinking, not the richness of the two together. Only much later did I come to understand that a healthy, balanced sense of self leads happily to a commitment to others, and that this commitment in turn strengthens the self in both its inward and its outward search for a place in the world. This is the ideal. I know a few people who have attained it.

The year before I returned to my father's house, I had struggled with the problem on a very practical level. While at Stanford University on a one-year poetry fellowship, I left an application to the Yale Divinity School clamped to the platen of my typewriter for two weeks. Divinity school, I thought, would be a good place to immerse myself in the religious questions I had pondered all my life. I'd answered readily enough the questions about my intellectual and spiritual interests, but for the life of me I could think of no honest way to discuss my commitment to pastoral care. I didn't have one. In fact, I was horrified by the lives of most

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of the preachers I knew. They had gone to seminary because of deep spiritual yearnings, I was sure, but the public nature of their jobs had turned most of them into glad-handing, fund-raising automatons, no different in affect from insurance salesmen. From the hard necessity of praying by the beds of dying friends and dying strangers, they had learned to spout bromides that parodied the understanding they had once strived so hard to find.

Trying to see myself as a preacher, I fixated on the obligatory twice-a-week hospital visits. When I was twenty-two, I had sat miserably by my mother's bedside in a Birmingham hospital. I refused to understand that she was dying. The harsh experimental drugs prescribed as a last-ditch treatment for her leukemia had roiled her stomach, and the nurses had half-spooned, half-slopped Maalox into her mouth. I sat transfixed by the white crust of Maalox that had dried around her lips, but I was so afraid of insulting her that I did not wipe her lips clean. If I were a preacher walking into that room, Bible in hand, what could I have said that would have been of any use to that confused, cynical, anguished boy? The hospital room of a dying woman is no place for complex theological grappling. It is a place for platitudes, and neither the boy I had been nor the preacher I imagined becoming could possibly accept them. Perhaps true charity is offering the platitudes even though they are unacceptable, and accepting them, knowing they are unacceptable. In the face of the ineffable, we offer the gesture of our own inadequacy as an act of love. This is the best understanding I have come to. But as I stared day after day at the divinity school application in my typewriter, I realized that seminary is a place for those who have moved past seeking to vocation. And with sorrow at giving up a life I could not lead, I pulled the application form from the machine and threw it away.

Back home in Montgomery, watching my father leave to tend the quadriplegic cowboy and return home exhausted, I saw that charity is a more naked thing than working for money. You don't do it often enough to become inured, and because you are not an employee, the relations resemble friendship more than they do work. You identify more with the people you are helping, and in a small but real way you suffer their suffering with them. For a committed Christian like my father, the connection is even more intense because the person you are raising from his soiled bed and holding in your arms is Christ himself. "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren," Jesus says, "ye have done it unto me." But how many of us, holding a urine-stained cripple in our arms, can see that we are holding the godhead itself? And how many of us can see through the horror of that man's suffering to understand, in joy, that we are serving God directly, without an intermediary? That person in our arms is not *like* God, he *is* God. And not just him. Everybody. Everyone in the world is Christ. Perhaps Mother Teresa in the slums of

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Calcutta could see this truth as Christ wanted her to see it. Perhaps Walt Whitman, nursing the sick and dying in the fetid air of the Federal hospitals of Washington, could see that it was Jesus screaming in pain on an abandoned stretcher, his legs blown to rags by grapeshot. But I could not yet see through suffering to God. I could see only the human being and the suffering.

Everyone in the world is Christ, but me. And I must do unto everyone in the world as Christ would. It was a fearful burden even to contemplate, and I quailed before it. A hardness of heart? A failure of sympathy? The failure of a moral and spiritual test? Yes, all of those. But if failing the test exacts a price, so does passing it. Did my father return home from his act of charity alight with glory and sure of his place in heaven because he had held Christ in his arms? Was he joyous and buoyant with Christian love? About half the time he was fine. He acted as if he had driven to the hardware store and bought a box of drywall screws. Nothing unusual. The other half of the time he could hardly speak. He picked at his pork chop and pushed his canned string beans around his plate, then stared glumly at a few sitcoms before he excused himself. In his bedroom, the door left slightly ajar, he read his Bible lesson for the day and went to bed early.

When I recall that summer, I don't think first of the long, arduous hours painting my father's house. If I push myself, I can remember the lovely solitude of the Winn-Dixie, where for a month, needing cash, I was the fill-in night crew. Listening to oldies and late-night call-in shows, carrying my radio from aisle to aisle, I slopped a mop down the dull linoleum, dusted shelves, fronted up the merchandise. Paid by the hour, I worked slowly, sang with the radio, argued with the emissaries of the National Rifle Association, and did the job right. Since I don't mind lukewarm soda pop, the Cokes and Lorna Doones took care of themselves, if you know what I mean.

Looking back, I don't even think first about the ghost. And I don't think first about Janelle either, I realize guiltily, though when I do think of her, what I remember is that I was always flecked with white paint. No matter how I scrubbed myself, no matter how thoroughly I examined my body, there was always some dab of paint I had not tracked down. Janelle loved to find paint on me. While I was driving down the road, she'd suddenly laugh, reach over, and flick a snowflake from behind my ear or rake one from my hair. Why couldn't I love her? And why isn't she the first thing I think about when I remember that summer?

Instead I remember with astonishing vividness something I never saw: my father holding the paralyzed bull rider in his arms while his wife whipped the soiled sheets off the bed and smoothed the fresh ones into place on the swaybacked mattress. These are all the facts I have, and I have added the swaybacked mattress to satisfy an imagination that can't

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keep its fingers off the story. More facts might have inhibited Janelle and me as we talked about it, imagining, speculating—making up our own stories in the absence of the real one. In *preference* to the real one. We didn't, as time went on, talk much about my father, and we talked even less about the cowboy himself. We took for granted his reticence, his humiliation, his numb depression. The person we returned to over and over again was the one we knew least about: the wife. "In her early twenties." "Married only three months before the accident." These were the only things my father had said about her.

As my father and I, without talking, negotiated the meaning of the crippled cowboy, Janelle and I, talking all the time, negotiated the meaning of the wife. I saw her as a onetime high school cheerleader—vivacious then, but now worn out from care and worry, and slightly cagey, one eye always open for help. Her outgoing nature had hardened into brittle good cheer because she felt she had to be friendly. She had to twinkle chastely at the men in her church, and share collusive and slightly submissive glances with the women, because, though she worked as a receptionist for the state board of education, her second and more important job was to keep the people in her church interested in her plight, bound to her misfortune, obligated.

In Janelle's version of the story, the wife embraced martyrdom. The maiming of her husband allowed her to seize control of her life from the handsome and vital roughneck to whom she had rapturously submitted as a girl. At first she was trapped in her martyrdom by her marriage vows and her decency, but as time went on she began to enjoy being noble. Maybe she was afraid of sex. Because fate had given her a way to be a wife without the burden of children and the demands of a husband, sexual and otherwise, she could bear with good cheer the complications she did have to live with. She had assessed her situation clearly and made the most of it. The world's pity was a bonus that she accepted or spurned as she saw fit.

But Janelle and I never said, "Love! She must really love him." Our stories, made of whole cloth, tell a little about us and nothing at all about the woman whom I can see as clear as a bell to this moment, in both our versions. Janelle's story is no less compelling to me than my own, and no less disturbing. It was not cynicism that drove our different versions of the story so much as an adult understanding of love's obligations—a hard-headed Calvinist knowledge that time leads all love, romantic or spiritual, to service. And for the one performing the service, the spirit with which it is given—sodden obligation or love—is crucial.

If my father saw me as the crippled cowboy because I was divorced and out of work, and if I saw him as the crippled cowboy because he was aging, moving closer and closer to the time I'd have to take care of him, Janelle and I were measuring each other as well. Certain questions began

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to rise unbidden in my mind: Is this someone I love enough to tend dutifully for the rest of her life if she were to be incapacitated by a stroke, paralyzed in a car wreck, bedridden with chronic black depression? Would I tend her not just from a sense of duty but with a persistent gratitude for the love we shared before her infirmity? And could I trust her to take care of me? Curiously, the questions about my devotion to Janelle were always more important to me than my questions about her love.

Janelle and I measured each other, but we both came up wanting.

We talked, talked, talked about necessities and desires. But as we talked about our almost love, we kept circling back to how even my father's wish that I accompany him on his visits was a desire, not a need. Our desire for each other kept knocking against necessity: the cowboy's need to have his sheets cleaned, the woman's need to change her husband's bed. Necessity is necessity, an irreducible. In Euripides' *Alcestis,* the chorus sings this strange, fearful hymn to Necessity:

> I have studied the poets, I have scaled the heights of astronomical lore, I have pored over the doctrines of the philosophers and have found nothing stronger than Necessity nor any cure for it in the Thracian tablets of the poet Orpheus nor even in the cures which Phoebus Apollo gave to the Asclepiads, providing remedies for poor suffering mortals.
>
> Of this goddess, alone, there are no altars, no statue to approach: Necessity heeds no sacrifices. Dread mistress, may you not come upon me more strongly than in my life so far. Whatever Zeus decides, this, with your agreement, he fulfills. You master by your strength even the iron among the Chalybians; with reverence for none is your spirit adamant.

Necessity: there is no cure for it. If the spirit of the service is crucial to the giver, the work simply has to be done, no matter how the one doing it feels about it. Beside the irreducible needs of the cowboy and his wife, Janelle's and my desire for each other shrank almost to nothing.

At the beginning of August, a Baptist university in Texas offered me a job as an English instructor. I didn't talk with Janelle before I took it. I visited her at Christmas and over the summers. We spoke once a week on the phone. Though we never formally agreed not to see other people, mostly I didn't. In three years I had only one month-long affair and one weekend fling because I felt disloyal to a commitment I had not, in fact, made. When I fell in love with the woman who is now my wife, I called Janelle immediately and broke things off. She said she had known for a long time that this moment was coming. From friends in Montgomery, I heard that she soon began a long relationship with a lawyer, a guy who did not believe in marriage. When they

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broke up, she quickly married someone else and moved to Atlanta. Everybody moves to Atlanta.

For five years after I left town, my father, every other day, lifted Jesus off his dirty sheets. While he held his paralyzed savior cradled in his arms, my father rattled through his list of things to talk about—just as my wife, when she was in high school, never got into a boy's car without a memorized list of conversational gambits. Finally my father's bursitis grew too painful and he had to pass the job along to someone else from his church. Was he glad to put it behind him? Or did he feel he had abandoned a commitment? He has never said.

Before I left for Texas, I had to finish painting the house. Above the fiberglass roof of the carport was a space I couldn't reach. From the ladder, I stretched into the space, painting as far as I could. Hanging over the edge of the roof, I slapped paint on the eaves, though I couldn't always see what my hands were doing. But without dismantling the whole flimsy carport, I couldn't figure out how to reach that last unscraped, unprimed, unpainted triangle of wall.

"I have an idea," my father said, and then he told me.

"I don't like it."

"Do you have a better idea?"

Well, I did. It was, "Let's hire a professional painter to set up scaffolding and finish the job for us." But I couldn't bring myself to say it. I'd promised to paint the damn house myself. I couldn't say no.

On the roof, my father tied a length of nylon rope around the air vent for the plumbing and tugged it twice.

"Even if I lose my grip on the rope," he said, "that'll hold you."

I sat down on the shingles, and he snugged the other end of the rope around my ankles and lowered me off the roof. Hanging upside down above the top of the carport, I scraped the cracked paint as quickly as I could. I swatted and gouged at the house. Every motion I made set me to swinging. I was a pendulum in my father's hands, not a plumb line. Sweat dripped backward down my body and into my eyes, and my face swelled painfully with blood. When my feet went completely numb, I'd yell, "Haul me up." On the roof, I'd take my sneakers off and massage feeling back into my feet. Then I'd lie on my belly and slide back over the side of the roof, head first. I primed and painted one coat only, slopping the drenched brush against the wall.

When we climbed down the ladder at the end of the day, Dad, holding the coiled rope in one hand and shading his eyes with the other, squinted at the wall, the splotched paint, the paint drops drizzled on the carport and the driveway.

"You didn't do a very good job there, did you?"

"No," I said. "No, I didn't."

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Reminiscing Concerning an Edenic Scene

JOHN TAGLIABUE

Idyllic
on a tiny island
just large enough for the more or less seven seals,
wet, plump, rubbery looking, content, lounging,
on vacation, whiskered, slippery, one more elegant
than Mme. Recamier,
was that the one I think of now as Eve? she in her
seemless evening gown,
and one nonchalant near her that I presumed
was Adam, debonair,
giving himself an airing, all of them before the Fall
had slipped out of
the wet pleased sexual hands of God, they had
not sinned, only
slipped lusciously into water that caressed them
as they darted,
swam, sank lower, nibbled, came to the top
again and again,
cavorted like dandies and damsels; this was
in the 1999
summer in the large bay of the Maine island
of Islesboro;
I report it truly, fairly, and reminisce.

John Tagliabue's most recent book is *New and Selected Poems 1942–1997*.

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Mr. Auden, Schoolmaster

JOHN DUGUID

At the barely weaned age of seven I was packed off to The Downs, a Quaker boarding school in the small Worcestershire village of Colwall, in the western part of England. It was fairly common at that time for professionals—my father was on the medical faculty of the University of Wales—to relegate the care of male offspring to other people, then to send them to prep school at a ridiculously early age. (In Britain the term *prep* connotes a different kind of educational institution, one that prepares you early for your public boarding school, rather than for the later university. This was thought to make lads tough and independent, I suppose. Daughters generally fared better.)

W. H. Auden, who was then in his late twenties, taught us English at The Downs. His name meant nothing to me at my age, of course, though I recall a certain amount of awed discussion among my parents and their friends. Though not "literary," they were readers, and by the mid-1930s Auden's name had begun to seep into the public awareness. Having come down from Oxford—where, along with Stephen Spender, C. Day Lewis, and Louis MacNeice, he belonged to the between-the-wars generation of poets—he had already published quite extensively. For a year or so he had also sampled the giddy atmosphere of postwar Berlin.

My memories of Mr. Auden (as he was always known to us—no first names in those days) are vivid but fragmented. I recall little of him in the classroom. Surely he ran his classes in fairly uproarious fashion. A clear impression remains of an energetic and cheerful man from whom words

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tumbled in a nervous torrent—humorous, even witty, pure clown at times, capable of joking on a level that could be appreciated by young boys, and evidently popular with his peers. Very rumpled and tweedy, he gave off an aura of contentment, of one who had found a niche in life, albeit a temporary one. It may have seemed a bit unusual that he would joke with us in an era when gravity of demeanor was expected of teachers charged with maintaining discipline. But of course The Downs was different; it was ahead of its time to have hired someone like Auden.

Set in what Auden described as "a land of farms," the school had a clear vision of where it was heading, cleaving to simple Quaker virtues—yet with little of the austere "plain folk" characteristics associated with members of the Religious Society of Friends. Not a gray Quaker bonnet in sight, though they were still being worn by a few, my grandmother among them. The Downs was under the enlightened headmastership of Geoffrey Hoyland, an extremely vital man. The very model of an educator, the Head was resolutely committed and humanely concerned, though he could appear stern when required. Dorothea Hoyland, his wife, was a daughter of Sir George Cadbury, who came from a noted Quaker family and was founder of the Cadbury chocolate manufactory.

Auden greatly admired Geoffrey Hoyland and dedicated a remarkable poem to him. He wrote "A Summer Night 1933," which appears on the facing page, after joining in the school custom of dragging beds out under the stars in warmer weather. The poem is a paean of joy and thankfulness for the author's lot at that time. The opening of the second stanza, "Lucky, this point in time and space / Is chosen as my working-place," is an expression of pure happiness at being part of The Downs. So are later references to "gardens where we feel secure," and "Our freedom in this English house, / Our picnics in the sun." But the poem also hints that the idyll of life at The Downs will not last, that there are ominous clouds on the international and domestic scenes—and perhaps on the personal scene as well. Rereading "A Summer Night 1933" with the help of hindsight sends shivers down the spine.

The Downs steered reasonably clear of the intractably spartan life, and of the fashionable contempt for things cultural and intellectual, that were the norm for English boys' schools of the time. But it did follow the bracing dictum of *mens sana in corpore sano,* along with the teaching of Latin: games, the gym, and (horror of horrors) sleeping in freestanding open-air dorms with windows open on all four sides, even in the most frigid weather, and (still greater horrors) mandatory cold showers every morning. It's a wonder we didn't come down with terrible ailments. But other than the usual colds and chilblains, we stayed quite fit.

Auden had a distinctly negative view of the effects of cold water on the male body. In *A Certain World,* a compilation from his commonplace book

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A Summer Night 1933

(to Geoffrey Hoyland)

Out on the lawn I lie in bed,
Vega conspicuous overhead
    In the windless nights of June,
As congregated leaves complete
Their day's activity; my feet
    Point to the rising moon.

Lucky, this point in time and space
Is chosen as my working-place,
    Where the sexy airs of summer,
The bathing hours and the bare arms,
The leisured drives through a land of farms
    Are good to the newcomer.

Equal with colleagues in a ring
I sit on each calm evening
    Enchanted as the flowers
The opening light draws out of hiding
With all its gradual dove-like pleading,
    Its logic and its powers

That later we, though parted then,
May still recall these evenings when
    Fear gave his watch no look;
The lion griefs loped from the shade
And on our knees their muzzles laid,
    And Death put down his book

Now north and south and east and west
Those I love lie down to rest;
    The moon looks on them all,
The healers and the brilliant talkers
The eccentrics and the silent walkers,
    The dumpy and the tall.

She climbs the European sky,
Churches and power-station lie
    Alike among earth's fixtures:
Into the galleries she peers
And blankly as a butcher stares
    Upon the marvellous pictures

To gravity attentive, she
Can notice nothing here, though we
    Whom hunger does not move,
From gardens where we feel secure
Look up and with a sigh endure
    The tyrannies of love:

And, gentle, do not care to know,
Where Poland draws her eastern bow,
    What violence is done,
Nor ask what doubtful act allows
Our freedom in this English house,
    Our picnics in the sun.

Soon, soon, through dykes of our content
The crumpling flood will force a rent
    And, taller than a tree,
Hold sudden death before our eyes
Whose river dreams long hid the size
    And vigours of the sea.

But when the waters make retreat
And through the black mud first the wheat
    In shy green stalks appears,
When stranded monsters gasping lie,
And sounds of riveting terrify
    Their whorled unsubtle ears,

May these delights we dread to lose,
This privacy, need no excuse
    But to that strength belong,
As through a child's rash happy cries
The drowned parental voices rise
    In unlamenting song.

After discharges of alarm
All unpredicted let them calm
    The pulse of nervous nations,
Forgive the murderer in his glass,
Tough in their patience to surpass
    The tigress her swift motions.

—W. H. Auden

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that was published three years before his death in 1973, he inveighed against the institution of cold baths:

> As cultural habits go, short-lived. I don't know precisely when it was introduced (1840?), but I know more or less when it came to an end. When I was young, not only was every boy at a boarding school compelled to take a cold bath every morning, a rule based on the entirely erroneous theory that cold water subdued the carnal passions, but almost all males of the upper and middle classes took one of their own free will. I believe I belong to the first generation which resolved, once we left school and got to the university, that we would never take a cold bath in our lives again. Today, inquiries lead me to think that there are few schools now where cold baths are obligatory, and I am sure no adult takes one except during a heat wave.

If cold water had any effect on male libido, it was purely transitory, at least in this writer's experience.

Still, this was 1934, and it must be emphasized that The Downs was striving to be, if not liberal, at least liberated from what would now be called the elitist mold set by Dr. Arnold at Rugby a century before. It made exemplary efforts, unusual at that time, to nurture latent talent or liking for music, writing, and the visual arts. Each boy had to try the violin. He could drop it if he felt inclined to, but he had to make the effort. The same went for piano, painting, clay modeling, and stone sculpture. No one in authority appeared to have given thought to the prospect of chisels slipping into inexperienced flesh, so we hammered away, letting chips fall where they might. As for writing, it was up to Mr. Auden to discover if lurking within us was the spirit of Apollo, the god who—among other arduous earthly duties—presides over youth and poetry.

Had I been touched by Apollo? I recall my anticipation on opening a new issue of *The Badger,* the school magazine that Mr. Auden had started, its vivid green cover adorned with a modernistic woodcut and the school motto, *Aedificandum Est* ("Build We Must"). On an early page was my poem "The Bells," about which nothing lingers but the title (and, I fear, its beginning: "Ring out wild bells!" Would Tennyson have found it in his heart to forgive?). But it was Auden who chose to include the poem, that I know. Had he detected a hint of Apollo? Did he want to coax him out into the open? I must have dared to hope so.

As the years pass, the memory not only plays tricks but also tends to leave mental lacunae. Did it happen in 1935, when the whole school climbed to the top of the Malvern Hills to see bonfires for miles around lighting up the night sky in celebration of the King George V Jubilee? Trying to pin down exact dates at this stage is fairly fruitless. Better to rely on remembered snippets of sound that are the essence of the period,

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conversations overheard and recorded on the mental tape recorder, such as "At last we've solved the Balkan problem"—yes, I remember overhearing that—and the roar of Nuremberg and other Hitlerian rallies that were beginning to be heard on the BBC. Here was noise more fearsome than the squealing of pigs beyond the wall of the Colwall abattoir.

Dredging Auden out of memory requires the mind to re-traverse the halls, stairs, and rooms of The Downs, and encounter him along the way. We head for the dining room—six steps off the hall, by the old pipe organ, past a door that leads into the kitchen, whence comes the clatter of dishes and the sound and smell of frying sausages. Did we live on bangers alone? And was it *eight* refectory tables with six boys along each side, a master at one end and a prefect, a senior pupil, at the other—or was it six? Over the fireplace—never used, it seemed—was a full-size reproduction of a painting from the Venetian Baroque. Was it Titian's *Assumption of the Virgin* or Tintoretto's *Ascension*? Whichever it was, it seemed curiously incongruous in that rather plain setting.

The meal is breakfast, so it pretty well has to be bangers. Mail is delivered to the tables. Among the pile of letters for Mr. Auden is a largish package containing a number of proofs of a book jacket for, I am fairly sure, *The Ascent of F-6,* though it could be *Letters from Iceland.* The design is the same for each proof: a pattern of geometrical shapes—triangles, squares, and so forth—against a plain background with the title; only the colors vary. He spreads them out among the plates and cups, and we all peer at them. "Which one d'you think?" Each boy expresses his choice. "That one," I venture, pointing to the proof with a yellow background. "Yes, I think so," says Mr. Auden.

A brief episode, but it suggests the generosity of spirit in which Auden shared his success with his young charges, for he was very active in British literary life even during those teaching years. At a later hour of the school day, I see Auden on the sidelines during a cricket match, urging us on: "Come on, The Downs, come on!" He was no athlete himself—he was not physically dexterous, and he suffered from flat feet. It is almost unimaginable that he would ever have walked onto the pitch, bat in hand, or stepped forth as a demon bowler. As a staff member, however, he would have been expected to take his turn supervising the obligatory games, including soccer and rugger, and I think of him as a dutiful joiner-in of events, a teamsman who did, with cheerful enthusiasm, whatever was asked of him.

Then there was his slavish addiction to nicotine, his endless cigarettes. The years ahead seemed eternal until we ourselves would mature enough to take up such sophisticated habits. But Auden couldn't have indulged in the classroom or in other public areas. Headmaster Hoyland would not have tolerated that. Perhaps the habit contributed to Auden's putty-like

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complexion—even then we remarked on his pallor. As he aged, he developed the marked facial cross-hatching familiar in later photographs.

I wonder now whether Auden attended Quaker meeting. His writings from those days suggest a man on an earnest spiritual search, though he was not linked to formal worship, as he would later be after returning to his Christian roots in 1940. By that time he was writing and lecturing in the United States, where he had settled. But during his time at The Downs, a school with a clear sectarian affiliation, a modicum of attendance would have been at least tacitly called for. Our school did not observe a full hour of silent worship; we interspersed it with conventional favorites from *Hymns Ancient and Modern,* accompanied on an ancient hand-pumped organ. Auden must have been at some of the Sunday meetings. All his life he loved to sing hymns—just as he sang with the school's Bach choir under the direction of the formidable Hilda Woodhams, our music teacher. It's said that when Auden came into a house that had a piano, he'd head straight for the keyboard and let go with a favorite hymn.

Despite all my years at The Downs, I possess only one school photo. Which year was it taken? We are ranged against the outside wall of the library, the smaller boys squatting in front at the feet of the staff members. They are seated, a few with spouses. The taller boys stand behind them. But where is WHA? I've seen recently a photograph taken earlier, in the identical setting, in which he sits with the rest of the staff. Another earlier picture, taken in 1933, shows a much smaller school body, posed at the corner of the music rooms. Most of the staff members, and many of the boys, appear in all three pictures. In the 1933 shot Auden is in the staff row, at right. Perhaps, in the summer when my one picture was taken, he was off somewhere, pursuing the literary life.

At The Downs, where he taught for six years, Auden was doing what other writers have done, and no doubt still do: using a teaching job as a momentary stopping place. Evelyn Waugh did it; so did Rupert Brooke. Teaching paid the bills in a world only grudgingly openhanded to poets.

In the years after World War II, I thought only rarely of Auden. Maybe I had an unconscious wish to put earlier times behind me. And Auden did not often step into the public limelight, though of course he never ceased to lecture and to write, at times prolifically. For years, in fact until within a year of his death in 1973 (in Austria, where he owned a summer cottage), we lived within a twenty-minute walk of each other in New York. But that I learned only later. So after The Downs, to my lasting regret, I never saw Mr. Auden again.

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Vacationing in Croatia

MATTHEW STEVENSON

Even during the NATO blitz over Yugoslavia, I kept alive my daydream that for our family summer vacation we might drift in the soft currents off the Dalmatian coastline. If the lightning warfare achieved neither the demise of Slobodan Milošević nor peace in Kosovo, it prompted in me a memory of summers past when I walked the ramparts of Dubrovnik and wandered among the Roman ruins outside Split. But every time I slipped these recollections into holiday discussions with my wife—usually when she sat down for dinner with expensive-looking Greek brochures in hand—her raised eyebrows questioned whether I had switched travel agencies to the one that had once convinced Charles Bronson of New York's *Death Wish* pleasures.

In *Cook's Continental Timetable,* I discovered Dalmatian and Istrian Travel and its proprietor, Boris Marelić, at a far-flung London address. After our telephone conversations, I would begin many dinner-table reports with the phrase "according to Boris" and follow with a bulletin about how Sarajevo had "opened up" or how the bus from Trieste to Dubrovnik "took only thirteen hours."

After the bombing subsided, through Boris's good offices I reserved four nights on Brijuni, once Tito's summer resort (the Italian name is Brioni), and four nights on the small island of Lopud, near Dubrovnik. The rest of the time, as I explained to our four children, we would be "tramping," save for a night on the coastal ferry that sailed south from Rijeka, which, according to Boris, would be something of a "mini-cruise."

On a hot July evening, in the company of other backpackers, we boarded the midnight Geneva-Trieste express and scrambled to our com-

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partment, so that long into the night the children could bicker about who was most deserving of the upper bunks. We were headed to Brijuni, off the west coast of Istria, a peninsula of Tuscan-like hill towns and medieval seafaring villages.

Not even Boris had known the schedules south from Trieste. On arrival, I confirmed my suspicion that a hydrofoil to Brijuni had departed before our train reached Trieste, and it became clear that no other ferries called along the coast. The next bus departed midafternoon. Seated in the back seat of a cab, my wife took this news stoically, as if trapped in *The English Patient*'s sandstorm. Conceding defeat, I opened negotiations with an Italian cabdriver to take us two hours south. He agreed, for an amount equal to the gross national products of Slovenia and Croatia, whose borders and soft rolling hills we would traverse. Thus our tramping began in the contour seats of a white Mercedes.

Brijuni is a cluster of low, pine-covered islands, about three miles from the mainland, across a windy—at least today—strait. It served as Tito's summer capital—the people's Hyannis Port. In the small harbor where the ferry docks, the Marshal had greeted a procession of foreign dignitaries coming to pay their respects to the doctrine of nonalignment. We had reservations at the Hotel Neptune, three stars of pleasant socialist realism on a harbor that otherwise evoked the imperial tranquillity of a Habsburg backwater, which it had been until Istria's largely Italian population was awarded to Italy after World War I.

Our adjoining rooms, both with a view, were fit for a commissar. Unpacking in a room that could have been a Kremlin lounge, the children staked claims to various spheres of influence—like Stalin at Yalta—and then we set off to find the beach on a paved path leading away from the harbor through a pine forest. After a ten-minute walk, we found both a quiet cove and a restaurant that had grilled fish and white tablecloths. Like socialist youth, the children launched themselves off a 1950s-era cast-iron slide, while from the restaurant deck chairs we bay-watched.

Over espresso, we congratulated ourselves on finding such a paradise far from madding Greek crowds. But that night, while we ate like noblemen in the hotel dining room, a gale swept the island, and we remained under that ill wind for the next four days. Beyond the breakers, the sea churned with whitecaps, as though Poseidon were taking revenge against Odysseus. In the following days we had to retreat from our enchanted cove, first on rented bicycles and then, more to the kids' taste, on the electric golf carts on which Tito had chauffeured the likes of Patrice Lumumba and Kwame Nkrumah.

Brijuni has Roman ruins and the foundations of a Byzantine outpost, little of which interested the children, who used their strictly allotted five minutes at the wheel stalking deer or trawling for peacock feathers. On

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our first joyride we toured what one leaflet described as Europe's finest championship golf course—one made more challenging by the deer tending the fairways and the greens rolled hard with white clay and stones, as if the Marshal had switched to bocce for his short game.

Tito's several summer houses, now sublet to the Croatian government, are hidden behind guarded fences. But the rest of the island—apart from the summer ministries—has rolling meadows and pine forests, through which herds of deer and other animals wander. Every time a head of state presented him with an elk or a llama, Tito would add it to the island's safari park; peacocks and deer he turned loose. Only a select few were mounted in the museum.

After a brief war with the Yugoslav National Army in 1991, Croatia became an independent republic, but prior to the break with Belgrade, the Croatian parliament, in an early effort at nation building, had declared Brijuni a national park. Ironically, although born in Croatia, Tito was coolly distant to its nationalist aspirations, preferring the fraternal collaboration of socialist republics. In Belgrade, after the partition, a Tito museum was consigned to the dustbin of history. In Croatia, President Tudjman, who had been one of the Marshal's generals, rehabilitated at least his Croatian origins, much the way American candidates run for office in various presidential graveyards.

We spent several afternoons, when rain mixed with gale winds, in the Tito museum. The first floor has dioramas of the African plain and frozen tundra; the corresponding text favorably compares Tito's ecological foresight with John Muir's. On the second floor are the Marshal's family albums, a chronicle of the Brijuni years, displayed on long gallery walls. During his time in office, 1945 to 1980, nearly all the world's leaders came to Brijuni, either to cull the deer population or to enjoy a barbecue. In most of the photographs, Tito looks like a movie-studio executive—in an open shirt, enjoying his yacht or decanting his wine. But not all his visitors appear to be taking time off.

Leonid Brezhnev, in a black suit and necktie, looks stiff and unforgiving, as if there to collect a past-due receivable, as I suppose he was. The Chinese agricultural delegation looks equally ill at ease, perhaps wondering how they will break the news to Mao that Tito has a golf course. Workers' collectives seem far from Tito's mind whenever he is entertaining such stars as Elizabeth Taylor and Sophia Loren, the latter appearing in a number of photographs. Both actresses seem delighted with the Marshal and the Istrian air—at least more so than Ho Chi Minh, who, seated awkwardly beside Tito in a speedboat, does not give the impression that he is there to drop the second ski.

The English historian A. J. P. Taylor called Tito the "last of the Habsburgs," and like the emperor Franz Josef, the Marshal spent six months a

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year running an ethnically diverse empire from his summer quarters. The image of Tito as an Austrian prince conflicts with the reputation of Josip Broz, mountain revolutionary and Comintern agent. But in searching for the reasons of Yugoslavia's collapse, too little attention has been focused on the federation's economic principles, in which Tito—with all the detachment of a noble landlord—funded the theories of Marx and Engels with the budget deficits of Habsburg largesse.

Tito's early five-year plans followed the Soviet model. He allocated heavy industry around the Yugoslav federation with the same political consideration with which congressmen dole out defense plants. Undeveloped regions such as Bosnia and Kosovo were burdened with the smokestacks of self-sufficiency, and Yugoslavia's competitive advantages in trade and agricultural production were sacrificed for the Stalinist means of production—few of which ever made money.

By the 1970s, nonalignment meant playing both sides of the Cold War for easy money, which funded the country's worker socialism and held the national debt to a level of $5 billion. Although the Yugoslav dinar was hailed in the West as a convertible currency, behind it were mirrors that deflected attention from both increasing budget deficits and the country's dependence on foreign aid.

Yugoslavia collapsed after the Russians and the Americans lost interest in paying for the swing votes in the Cold War. In 1991, when Yugoslavia went into liquidation, Tito's heirs owed foreign creditors $20 billion, one reason few of the constituent republics decided to wait around for Belgrade to add up the bill. As the fighting began, columnists pontificated—whether accurately or not—on what they called "age-old" antagonisms between Serbs and Croats, but missed the fact that one in four Yugoslav families was living along the poverty fault lines of Austro-Hungarian peasantry.

As part of my pre-vacation due diligence, I had gone as far as accepting an invitation to have dinner in May with the U.S. ambassador to Croatia. We had graduated from the same American university, which now arranged the meeting. It was a chance for me to see Zagreb and to glean from informed State Department sources whether it would be safe to visit Dubrovnik, a hundred miles from the bombs then falling on Montenegro.

Ambassador William Montgomery is a professional diplomat who speaks Russian and a number of Balkan languages, having been posted for more than twenty-five years in several of the region's capitals. That morning we met in his office, overlooking Zagreb's central park, and chatted briefly. He then went to a series of meetings, and since our dinner was not until evening, I was free to wander the city. Zagreb reflects five centuries of Habsburg rule. At first glance, it could be Graz or Salzburg, and

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the divide between Zagreb's Catholic, Austrian spires and Belgrade's Slavic, Orthodox domes speaks volumes about the eventual Yugoslav dissolution.

Nurtured by Pan-Slavism in the nineteenth century, Yugoslavia emerged in the twentieth, not because both Croatia and Serbia shared a dream of central government, but because each feared an imperial restoration by either the Habsburgs or the Ottomans. But in 1919, after the Treaty of Versailles carved the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes from the wreckage of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, an American envoy wrote: "The city of Zagreb itself has a predominant autonomist sentiment, because the people would like to see Zagreb the most important city in Yugoslavia and do not welcome the idea of being second to Belgrade."

Walking under the linden trees of a Zagreb spring, I found it hard to reconcile the city's graceful symmetry with its history of political disequilibrium. As early as 1921, it had lost its parliament, the Sabor, which had been tolerated by the dual monarchy. Through the 1920s, the city's hopes of self-government—in a fractured federal system—were displaced by the desperate measures of the king and Belgrade to assert their waning central authority.

During the 1930s, as in modern times, Yugoslavia's disintegration mirrored the earlier collapses of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires, from which the inhabitants of Yugoslavia had sought refuge in collective numbers. As Professor John R. Lampe writes in *Yugoslavia as History,* "The idea [of central government] itself could not . . . create political consensus."

In the afternoon, I inspected many of the city squares, aware that, in rewriting history, the government of Franjo Tudjman had committed the city's bronze horsemen to the service of forgetting the past. Gone with the busts of solidarity were reminders that Croatia had willingly suppressed the democratic revolutions of 1848 and that the country in its modern form had sprung from the ribs of fascism, in whose legions the Ustashi ruthlessly served their German and Italian masters.

In the 1990s, Croatia became a nation without a memory, defined only by its perceived opposition to Serbian aggression. Even President Tudjman, who died a few months after my visit, had climbed to power by rewriting the past, arguing that the alleged holocaust against Serbs and Jews in fascist Croatia was exaggerated—and had thus reinvented himself as a nationalist statesman, not simply another former Yugoslav general skilled in the choreography of agitprop.

During my visit to Zagreb, I heard the story of Croatia's economic evolution from Tito's workers' paradise to what sounded like Russian capitalism mixed with a little Indonesian insider trading. Instead of returning the Yugoslav state assets to the workers, whose councils presumably held title, the Tudjman government had treated itself to a manage-

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ment buyout, using the leverage of political office to cash in the stock options. So-called manager credits had been redeemed for controlling stakes in the large public enterprises, which now had the same choke hold on the economy that Belgrade's ministries had previously held.

In the rush toward a market economy, Croatia had spawned at least sixty new banks, many of which were little more than the teller windows of industrial combines, some with links to the presidential party. Under this crony capitalism, banks recycled deposits into their shareholders' pockets, and more than a few people I met whispered that the Tudjman circle had undeclared dividends exceeding $1 billion.

That evening at dinner, I came to admire Ambassador Montgomery, a man of accomplishment and courage who had won a Bronze Star in Vietnam and now had his career on the line in the Balkans' cauldron. As a young diplomat in Belgrade, he had dealt with a rising apparatchik, Slobodan Milošević. But when war with Serbia over Kosovo loomed, the State Department had not sought his advice on how to deal with the Serbian leader. Now he was committed to implementing the Dayton Accords, with its laisser-passer for all refugees, and to integrating Croatia's dynastic economy into the trade belts of western Europe.

As we ate, we recalled the Dalmatian coast as though it were a familiar poem, and I left the evening with the confidence to journey south in the summer. Ambassador Montgomery's wife had assisted in Dubrovnik's reconstruction, and they loved the Istrian medieval villages. Even during the NATO attacks, the Montgomerys had enjoyed Dalmatian weekends, but it haunted me to hear them describe Dubrovnik as a ghost town, as if it had turned into Edgar Allan Poe's "kingdom by the sea."

Because I surrendered to another taxi ride, from Brijuni to Rijeka—it was still pouring rain—we were early for the coastal ferry, which departs for Dubrovnik at 6:00 P.M. I proposed lunch in Opatija, the Austrian resort where James Joyce rewrote chapters of *Ulysses*. We found his Hotel Imperial. But rather than drinking coffee on its terrace or imagining walks across Dublin, we went farther down the tawdry seafront, ordered pizza, and spent the bleak afternoon at a concession with trampolines and battery-powered Formula One cars—as Joyce said in another context, "a nightmare from which I am trying to awake."

The *Liburnija*, our "cruise" ship, was built in 1963 and is much like a tramp steamer: in the hold were trucks, cars, and the trailers of summer; our cabin was permeated with engine fumes; the decor throughout was linoleum, as in a mobile home; and a huddled mass of backpackers was on the deck. We tried a meal in the ship's dining room, which served Chicken Kiev and Iron Curtain Cole Slaw—after which the children subsisted on ice cream and soda from a snack bar.

Dalmatia is a vast archipelago of pine-covered islands, like Brijuni, and

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others parched hard by what could equally well be the Greek summer sun. Before the Yugoslav wars, more than three million tourists clogged the coastline, but this year it had an out-of-season feel even in July. The ferry calls along the coast and among the islands, discharging tourists, camper vans, and wind surfers, and sometimes taking on crates filled with local fruit, much of it delivered to the pier by wraiths dressed in dark shawls and woolen stockings.

Venice ruled Dalmatia from 1409 until the end of the Napoleonic wars, after which it became—depending on the wars raging across Europe—Austrian, Italian, German, or Yugoslav. Although it is now part of Croatia, only in 1939, during the waning moments of the first Yugoslavia, was it linked to Slavonia, the other side of the Croatian horseshoe. Dalmatian accents remain Venetian, and most small harbors have a bell tower, a chapel, and a promenade. Korcula, Bill Montgomery's isle of fancy, may have been the birthplace of Marco Polo.

During lunch, such as it was, the ferry called at Vis. During World War II, before Yugoslavia was liberated, Vis was captured by the British and served as a forward base of operations. In their wartime memoirs, both Fitzroy Maclean and Milovan Djilas tell of traveling here to make the case for Tito's partisans, rather than for aid to the Chetniks of royalist general Draža Mihajlović. Winston Churchill had wanted a more active front in the Balkans to deny the Russians future influence in eastern Europe. The Americans preferred the soft underbelly of southern France. But even tepid British support for Tito's partisans helped to leave postwar Yugoslavia in the galaxy of red stars.

In my mind, and according to Boris, we were to spend our day at sea mini-cruising down the Adriatic, soaking up history and perhaps a few German beers. In reality, despite the splendors of Korcula and Vis, I found it impossible to rouse the family from our cabin, where, for most of the day, my wife read aloud from the collected works of J. K. Rowling. To the children, Venetian beaux arts were no match for Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, and Albus Dumbledore. I prowled the deck with my map, guide, and Yugoslav histories, in some ways feeling like Mister Roberts.

Lopud had come with several recommendations. Friends had sung its praises because it exists without cars and is close to Dubrovnik. Bill Montgomery had entertained a congressional delegation there, giving it the junket seal of approval. Boris, equally enthusiastic, had booked us into the Hotel Lafodia, although he hinted that it bordered both the sea and the architectural backwaters of the Central Committee.

Urchins pulled a wagon with our luggage along the medieval waterfront, and shortly after sunset I presented our vouchers to an indolent circle of desk clerks. I had taken vouchers to give Boris a piece of the action, but in looking around the Lafodia I realized that I had traded into

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a nonconvertible currency. We had two rooms, on upper floors reached by an elevator without doors, as in a low-budget housing project. We unpacked and headed to dinner, which was served in a ballroom of empty tables, large enough to accommodate five hundred members of the Croatian-Bulgarian Friendship Society.

Dinner featured a "French salad," and as my wife slowly picked frozen peas and carrots from the mayonnaise, I could tell she was silently dissecting the vacation as well. We had had four rainy and windy days on Brijuni, afternoon idylls at the Tito museum, and the mini-cruise on the *Liburnija*, inhaling diesel fumes and cream soda. Now at the Lafodia we were footnotes in a five-year plan. I imagined a divorce lawyer pleasing the court with a brochure of the Greek islands.

The next morning, after a breakfast of hot dogs, I went in search of a hotel that might redeem the vacation. A guest house I tried was full, and the Hotel Grand, a specimen of 1960s cubism, was boarded up. I tried to reserve a table for dinner at an attractive restaurant, but the waitress explained that this seaside terrace, shaded by an arbor and dappled with impressionist sunlight, was available only for guests with a meal plan. (*His vacation in doubt, Ivan Denisovich decided to face his wife back at the Lafodia . . .*)

Before trudging home to my fate, I asked the waitress a few more questions and discovered that I was standing outside the Hotel Lopud—by some twist of fate, a subsidiary of the Lafodia. Only those with Lafodia vouchers could be guests at the Lopud. I felt like someone with food stamps being told that he was accepted at the Oak Room. I traded our Lafodia tenements for rooms with a view, booked the terrace for dinner, and went off to fetch the luggage. My wife responded as if she had been fitted with Cinderella's glass slipper.

During the following days we never tired of swimming in the island's crystalline waters or eating lunch at the beach under an awning of thatch. Each night after dinner we strolled along the harbor promenade, where my wife could dream of restoring Venetian villas and the children could demand souvenirs from a seafront kiosk. And on all our walks we passed the restaurant where the U.S. congressional delegation had been wined and dined.

A hundred years ago, that imperial mission would have been Austrian, celebrating Vienna's conquest of Bosnia in the 1878 Treaty of Berlin or, after the 1912–13 Balkan wars, the establishment of its puppet government in Albania. Each was designed to deny Serbia access to the Adriatic's warm water. In both cases the Austrians dealt blows to Slavic expansionist dreams—much as the Clinton administration, with its policies of Balkan occupation, cut Russia out of Europe.

Something about a congressional delegation fact-finding on Lopud reinforced my sense that the Clinton administration had taken up the Habsburgs' burden. Whatever was stated in official communiqués, the

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Dayton Accords left Bosnia an American protectorate, much as the nineteenth-century peace conference in Berlin had awarded it to Austria. In Kosovo, American and NATO hussars quelled a disturbance on a distant frontier—to teach the Serbs a lesson and to keep Russian proxies from meddling in the empire's realm.

Time and again, Washington's war footing against the Serbs reminded me of a Viennese imperial masquerade. Secretary of State Albright beat the familiar war drums of Count von Berchtold, the emperor's foreign minister, and ultimatums were delivered to Belgrade before cruise missiles, latter-day dragoons, were dispatched across the Sava River. President Clinton's miscalculation—that Milošević would not cleanse Kosovo in response to the NATO bombing—recalled Austria's bungled 1914 invasion of Serbia, which fell only after more than a year of war.

Accounts of the Kosovo fighting brought to mind the extravagance of Vienna's imperial war games. NATO launched twenty-three thousand missiles and bombs against the Serbs, but failed to dent the entrenched Yugoslav armor. The bombing cost $4 billion, and the aid and peacekeeping that followed cost another $14 billion. But all this brought little peace to Kosovo. After the smoke and the press conferences had cleared, the black hand of Slobodan Milošević remained on the controls in Belgrade. Despite the Western press allegations of a holocaust by Serbs during the fighting, fewer than four thousand Albanian bodies were uncovered in Kosovo—not many more than the Serbs killed by NATO's lancers.

For the Blair and Clinton administrations, however, Kosovo was a splendid little war, a chance for everyone to trot out regimental colors or share the pain of the Albanian refugees. As Frederic Morton wrote of Vienna in 1914: "Nothing but style underpinned the Empire—style and an army with the world's smartest uniforms." But a month after the war's end, as we approached Dubrovnik in twilight, the battle for Kosovo was as forgotten as last spring's light opera. To judge by the copy of the *International Herald Tribune* that I read as we sailed from Lopud, Washington had turned its attention to the waltz of the president and the young woman on his private dance card.

I had first seen Dubrovnik and the Hotel Argentina on a family vacation in 1970, when one evening, by miscommunication with a desk clerk, my parents had taken their three children to a striptease club. It was to the Argentina, if not to my childhood memories, that we now returned.

In 1970, the hotel had represented a great leap forward for Yugoslav tourism. The marble stairs echoed the ambiance of a Party Congress. During the fighting between Serbs and Croats in 1991, the Argentina had been shelled and partially burned, and now the gloss of its lobby and the elegance of the cliffside dining suggested that the hotel had inherited one of the fortunes of war. International tourists were still absent, but

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there was a contingent of off-duty diplomats, aid workers, soldiers, and journalists. They had driven down from the nearby peace lines in Bosnia and had, perhaps, a bit of the $5 billion for Bosnian reconstruction on their expense accounts.

Dubrovnik was always a free city—neither Turkish, Italian, Serbian, Austrian, nor Croatian. In the early Renaissance era, when it was known as Ragusa, the city-state never fell to Venice, though it adopted many of Venice's mercantile and democratic ideals. Beyond the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire, it served as an entrepôt and brought prosperity to the Balkans by exporting local goods and produce. In a book about Yugoslav literature, my grandfather, then a Columbia University professor, sang Dubrovnik's praises as "a little republic, whose population did not surpass a few dozen thousands of inhabitants, [that] produced from the end of the fifteenth century a relatively prodigious number of writers and savants, and a great majority of them of superior merit."

In 1991, when Croatia seceded from Yugoslavia and took Dubrovnik with it, the Yugoslav army decided that the only way to save the city was to destroy it. Shells fired from the surrounding hills spread terror and burned a number of buildings, including the Argentina. "It was the revenge of the poor boys from the mountains," the journalists Laura Silber and Allan Little have written, "on one of the richest, most westward-leaning parts of the former Yugoslavia. It culminated, in November [1991], in the systematic destruction, by wire-guided missile, of every last yacht in the harbor of the old town."

The architects of greater Serbia had hoped to isolate the city, perhaps to retain its tourism profits for the shortchanged Yugoslavia. Dalmatia, they claimed, had few historical ties with the Croatian heartland in Slavonia. But in the battle for hearts and minds ("public opinion wins wars," as General Eisenhower said in 1944), sympathy for Serbia became a lost cause when Milošević or some regional Montenegrin commander ordered the first shots fired in anger against Dubrovnik's red-tiled roofs.

Until that moment, the arguments in the Balkans were as difficult to comprehend as the fourteenth-century poetry of Kosovo treachery and salvation. Who knew, then as now, the history of the Krajina Serbs, the significance of the Sporazum, or why King Alexander was murdered in 1934? But every Western tourist knew Dubrovnik's magnificence—its Renaissance charms amidst Balkan deceit, its Italianate grace on the edge of Tito's brave new world. The good ship *Liburnija* was pressed into the service of the city's relief, lifting the siege with cargoes of food and medicine. Even a PEN delegation got into the act, lambasting the Serbs for putting Dubrovnik to the torch.

On walks through the town, I bought several books that celebrated Dubrovnik's martyrdom, each replete with photographs of Serb atrocities. The pictures evoked Beirut, much as the headlines recalled the

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plight of Dresden. Friends who lived through the shelling, however, speak of its symbolism rather than its casualties. Eight years later, it is hard to recognize the war damage. The replacement red tiles do not match the deeper colors of the old roofs, and many buildings have been pockmarked by shells—although to the untrained eye it is difficult to tell during which dark age the shells were fired.

Omitted from the published accounts of wailing walls, however, are the reasons why the Serbs raised the siege. In 1992, the war had begun in Bosnia; Serbs and Croats shared the sentiments of President Tudjman that "Bosnia was a creation of the Ottoman invasion of Europe." Dubrovnik was left alone so that Serbs and Croats could press their campaigns against the Bosnian Muslims. Once again Ragusa was free of foreign entanglements.

It was only at the end of our stay in Dubrovnik that I addressed the question of how we would get home to Switzerland. At a few dinners, I mentioned circumspectly that we still had tickets for a ferry to Bari, the Italian port, and train reservations to Geneva. Had I shoved aside Harry Potter to read aloud from Rebecca West's 1,181-page *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, which lay untouched in my wife's luggage, I couldn't have found a less receptive audience.

On our afternoon excursions—great souvenir treks—I collected airline schedules. But few Western carriers fly into Dubrovnik's treacherous airport. From a local travel agent I learned that we could take a bus to Sarajevo and there connect with a Swissair flight. I knew Boris would approve. He might even call it a "mini-tour." But my wife tempered her enthusiasm.

We finally departed on an early Croatia Airlines flight to Zagreb. Backpacks, topped with Brijuni peacock feathers, were in the Argentina lobby at 5:30 A.M., and not even our three-year-old complained during the predawn ride along the coast road's hairpin turns. With a handful of travelers, we cleared security and waited near the tarmac to board the jet.

Looking up at the jagged, forlorn peaks that had claimed the lives of Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown and his colleagues, I mused on how little tramping we had done in the previous two weeks. We had traveled Istria by taxi, fled the Lafodia to the Hotel Lopud, lounged in the Argentina's deck chairs, and now we were flying home on an Airbus.

As the plane climbed to altitude above the mountainous Croatian littoral, I retrieved from my backpack the London *Times* review of my grandfather's book, printed in 1922, in which he praises Dubrovnik. He was born a Serb, four years after the Treaty of Berlin, but fled Belgrade in 1903, a victim of the political repression that still maintains its grip on that sad country. He lived seventy years after coming to America, and he never returned to Serbia or the successive Yugoslavias—fearful that either

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its kings or its new class might remember how he had treated them in print.

The *Times* called him "erudite without being pedantic." His dream for Yugoslavia was that it would emulate the pluralism of Switzerland, where we now live. Dubrovnik was his ideal for economic and artistic development. But German recognition of Croatia and Bosnia in 1991–1992 (which pushed a bankrupt Yugoslavia into the abyss of civil war), the 1995 American occupation of Bosnia, and the NATO onslaught for Kosovo's autonomy would have filled him with a dread of imperial restoration, of which he wanted no part. Nor would it have come to him as a surprise that the Viennese waltz was all the rage in Washington and London.

I knew my grandfather only when I was a boy—at the same ages as the children now around me, with their backpacks and peacock feathers. But I have always sensed his kindred spirit. Even at this early hour of the day, his words amused me. His description of Renaissance Yugoslav authors applied equally well to modern political commentators: "They go on writing after their inspiration is exhausted, and as a rule inspiration comes to them only in short passages." As we headed home, it pleased me to think of Dubrovnik linking my grandfather with my children across the lonely chasm of the generations.

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Hosanna in the Family

WALT McDONALD

Uncle Earl rolled his eyes over Aunt Bernice
and winked. Aunt Bernice was a honey,
curvy and plump. Earl deeded her parents
a section of his ranch, a dowry she didn't have,

sweetheart so well endowed he didn't mind,
would have signed his sunburned soul
on the dotted line. Before Vietnam,
before my cousin Bobby died at Da Nang,

I worked eight summers on the ranch,
their only nephew. Uncle Earl taught us
to ride, to rope and hold a calf down
for branding, to jab and burn its hide

and step back while it flounced and rose.
Aunt Bernice heaped biscuits on our plates,
and yellow butter, my cousin's creamy mother
who worshiped sunburned Uncle Earl,

who drawled raw jokes and stabbed his fork
in the air like pitching hay. What simple days
before the war, hard work and horses
I thought I'd ride forever with Bobby,

Aunt Bernice spoiling us all, forking sausage
and biscuits on our plates, winking
at Bobby and me, leaning toward Uncle Earl
and humming, patting his big-boned fists.

Walt McDonald is Horn Professor of English at Texas Tech University and the author of several books of poetry, including *Whatever the Wind Delivers* and the forthcoming *All Occasions.*

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The Anatomy of Wildflowers

M. RUKMINI CALLIMACHI

On the first day of summer, my grandmother
plunges her hands into the secret organs
of the earth and pulls out flowers:

a *trandafir,* the Romanian rose, a dandelion
and the violet. Her hands are not tender,
like the petals of this earth's wildness,
and for this, I will always long for bluntness.

In Brashov, we gather what we can find
and then walk the path to Poiana.
She is holding wildflowers
and I am grasping
the quickly shifting folds of her skirt.

In the kitchen, my grandmother
washes the liver
of the violet. With a bread knife, she will cut
the pancreas of the rose. I watch
as she spreads and opens the trachea
of the dandelion and arranges the long stems
in a glass bowl.

Everyone knows that I am not afraid
of this anatomy. I am five, my grandmother
is tall and full of words.

Seven summers, her hands, gossamer,
the delicate skin of the white apricot. It is August,
the cancer has moved from her blood to her liver
and the doctor opens her body like the stem of the wild rose.

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What does he know of flower picking?
Of removing the large intestine of the hyacinth?
Of cutting the esophagus of the marigold?

My mother is proud I do not look away.
She says I will be a doctor, like my father,
that I will learn to watch the hair fall off the dandelion.

All through the night, I sit by my grandmother
and hold her by the hand, telling her the names
of flowers in Romanian: *trandafir, lalele,*
crisanteme. My grandmother has spilled
her words like the petals of the wild aster.
She doesn't speak when I bring her the lilac
and jasmine. Her hands are soft when I reach
to touch them: I open her palm, the yellow heart
of the violet, and give her the wetness
of the sweet, dark earth.

(after Pablo Neruda)

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Relief

SUSAN HAHN

The morning is high with young air.
What does it know from the old wind,
the crackle of leaves, sad notes
about beauty—the hours perfumed

by pastels, then violent reds?
The blood lily with its fleshy stem
tempts me to lie down with it
in the afternoon's thick grass.
Tonight a tea rose will tear

at its own delicate throat, spread
itself too wide over
the path where lovers are all
mouths—their tongues all

pistils and stamens, while you and I
brush against each other's
lips—call it a kiss.
We look forward with familiar

relief that September arrives almost
tomorrow. Soon there will be less
heat to remind us of what we miss.

Susan Hahn is the editor of *TriQuarterly* magazine. Her most recent book is *Confession*.

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Max Weber in America

WOLFGANG J. MOMMSEN

In the summer of 1903, the Heidelberg sociologist Max Weber had a visit from Hugo Münsterberg, a Harvard professor known for his pioneering work in the new field of applied psychology. Dr. Münsterberg was promoting an international gathering of scholars from many disciplines, to be held in St. Louis, Missouri, the next year. He invited Weber to attend, and to present a paper on Germany's rural community.

Weber, then thirty-nine, had not been well. He had suffered a nervous collapse five years earlier, had been institutionalized at intervals, and had lived for a time in Italy in the hope of regaining his intellectual stamina. He was still unable to teach, but by 1903 he had resumed some of his scholarly work. Münsterberg's invitation, and the prospect of visiting the world's most advanced industrial nation, elated him; he accepted immediately. Weber's lecture at the St. Louis Congress of Arts and Science in the fall of 1904—his first public appearance in more than four years—provided the occasion for an extensive American tour that was pivotally important to the development of his social and political thought.

Until 1899, Weber had been engaged almost entirely in research on agrarian policies in the eastern provinces of Prussia. In the United States he would be able to observe at first hand the revolutionary force of modern capitalism—the force that was about to destroy traditional social structures in East Elbia, and would introduce modern capitalist calculation into peasant landholdings as well as the management of the estates of Prussia's landed aristocracy, the Junkers. Cut off from their traditional lineages with the land, agrarian workers were now being paid hourly wages, like the industrial proletariat. Weber saw this as a major factor behind the

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widespread migration of agrarian workers to the West, and he feared that it would result in the Polonization of German provinces in the East. To his classes in economics, Weber had presented the rise of capitalism as an entirely new social formation.

In the reading he did before his American visit, Weber focused particularly on Puritanism and its connection with capitalism. That led him back to arguments, current in Germany some years earlier, concerning the correlation between Protestantism and industrial activity. Stimulated in part by Werner Sombart's recently published *Der moderne Kapitalismus,* Weber had studied this issue. His essay "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" went to the printer just before he left for the United States in the summer of 1904. The essay set off a storm of controversy, but it established Weber's worldwide reputation as a social scientist.

Weber had trouble selecting a suitable topic for his St. Louis lecture. With some hesitation, he chose to explore the interrelationship between the structure of agrarian landholding and the fate of landed workers in Prussia's eastern provinces. But his talk also contained observations about the United States that were unmistakably influenced by Alexis de Tocqueville.

Weber sought to place American society in the grand historical context of social development since antiquity. The size of the country, its low population density, its high social mobility, the dynamism of its rapidly expanding industrial economy, the non-authoritarian character of religious institutions that favored diversity and individual initiative—all these factors, in Weber's view, created favorable conditions for the evolution of a free and highly dynamic society. "Perhaps never before in history has it been made so easy for a nation to become a great civilized power as for the American people," Weber declared. "Yet, according to human foresight, it also is the last time in the long-lasting history of mankind that so favourable conditions for a free and grand development will exist; right now the areas of free soil are vanishing throughout the world."

Weber's extended visit to the United States was his first direct encounter with an advanced industrial society, and he made the most of it. He calculated that he rode American railways for a total of approximately a hundred and eighty hours. He stopped off at cities in northeastern, Middle Atlantic, and southeastern states; visited Chicago and New Orleans; and went as far as the Muskogee Indian Territory of Oklahoma. Intensely interested in the American academic system, he visited nearly all the major East Coast universities, including Harvard, Yale, Brown, and Johns Hopkins, sometimes attending classes to observe American teaching methods. He tried to soak up as much information as possible about American society, about political and economic conditions, and especially about religious life. With the thought of writing a *kul-*

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turgeschichtliche Studie on the role of religious sects in the United States, he began assembling source materials. Some of the larger university libraries, Weber complained, no longer cared to collect the religious scripts of the early Puritan sects. He therefore visited a number of small denominational colleges—among them Haverford, near Philadelphia, the first Quaker college on American soil—to hunt them down.

To Weber, American society represented the development of capitalism in its most advanced form—if not, to use Lenin's phrase, its highest stage. Wherever he went, he sensed the "spirit of capitalism" at work. He expressed admiration for the examples of earlier stages of industrial development that he saw in New York, in Chicago (the most capitalist of all American cities), in the Rockefeller empire, and in the conglomerates formed by the great railway tycoons. Capitalist development, he wrote, was proceeding with enormous speed: everything "opposed to the culture of capitalism is going to be demolished with irresistible force." Weber tended, perhaps, to exaggerate, but he was certain that he was witnessing a process of world-historical significance.

Weber investigated the social aspects of industrialization, especially the living conditions and spirit of the labor force. He met the social worker Florence Kelley and discussed with her, as with many others, the issues of the day—particularly the difficulties of getting protective regulations accepted by the great capitalist entrepreneurs, and the impact of immigration on the labor market, with its weakening effect on the bargaining position of trade unions. He was impressed by the number of those he met who voiced anxiety about the "desastrous [*sic*] consequences of unrestricted immigration."

Racial issues arose in these discussions. Most of the white people Weber talked with were for strict segregation. From the start, Weber took a liberal line: he strongly disapproved of the color bar and of any legal disqualification of black people. He made contact with leading members of the African-American community, among them the scholar W. E. B. Du Bois, who had studied in Berlin and had already published widely on the American "Negro problem." Weber was then associate editor of the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik,* and he invited Du Bois to write for the journal. Weber himself intended to publish in the *Archiv* a review of the relevant American literature on racial relations (a plan that did not materialize). He was also keenly interested in the Indian question. He visited the Muskogee tribe to learn more about the partition of land then taking place—undoubtedly, he believed, to the disadvantage of the bulk of the Indian population, which would be unable to make much use of the relatively small compensation paid to the tribes for giving up territorial rights.

Weber's main concern, however, was the religious dimension of American life. He was especially interested in the social role of America's small religious communities, including societies for ethical studies, as

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against the role that institutionalized churches played in continental Europe. He visited distant relatives, some of them clergymen in relatively remote religious communities, to gather information. The intensity of the average American's involvement with church or sect interested Weber less for religious reasons than for its social and political implications. He was most impressed by the formative function that membership in voluntary religious associations had on the individual. He concluded that religious groups practiced a sort of social selection by co-opting as members only those who were considered morally worthy and were, at the same time, respected and professionally successful citizens. This process, he believed, had a beneficial effect on society at large, for it encouraged individual initiative and efficiency and was a source of self-respect. "As long as the old spirit of Yankeeism was still alive," wrote Weber, "American democracy never was a mere heap of sand of isolated individuals, in spite of all the trusts and trade unions, but largely a network of exclusive associations. Their archetype is the religious sect. They all demand from their members as a matter of fact all those qualities which make a business gentleman as is required by capitalism, thereby bringing it about."

Returning to Germany, Weber continued his work on the interrelationship of religious attitudes and capitalism, making ample use of the findings he had made on his American visit. The second part of "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" was followed by an essay on American religious sects and denominations. Two key aspects of these studies can be traced to Weber's experiences in the United States.

One is the social and economic relevance of the interaction between religious—or as Weber later called them, "otherworldly"—convictions and "innerworldly" social activity, specifically the role of belief in the emergence of market-oriented industrial capitalism. A second aspect involves the social dynamics of voluntary associations, religious or otherwise, in establishing a free society based on mutual recognition of the worthiness, and the social and economic achievements, of the individuals within it. In Weber's view, voluntary associations were an important factor in creating a type of social interaction that helped explain the individualistic features of American society.

Weber's American tour also contributed to the development of his theory of plebiscitary democracy. In the United States he had observed a new type of party organization that was essentially devoid of ideology and lacked a formal program. Especially on the lower levels of the political system, American parties seemed to Weber to be based not on distinct ideological platforms, but primarily on the appeal and personal following of individual leaders. Local and regional party bosses represented a new brand of politics that belonged to the future.

Weber's views may have been biased by the one-sided nature of some

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of his sources. They doubtless overemphasized certain aspects of American social reality at the expense of others. Nonetheless, they became fundamental to the universal theory of occidental development that Weber worked out in the last decade before World War I, and later formulated in an even more generalized way in his essays on the sociology of world religions. From a socioeconomic perspective, the United States appeared to move at the head of a process that had so far encompassed only the West, but would eventually engulf the entire world.

According to Weber, the history of the West was dominated by a seemingly irreversible, though not necessarily linear, path of increasing disenchantment with all nonrational forms of social orientation. The magical and theocratic modes of social and intellectual interaction that had been dominant in early societies were gradually yielding to more rational forms of mental orientation. World religions were particularly effective in determining the way people lived, but eventually they would give way to a secular type of rationality associated with the emergence of modern science. Forms of social thought that were not compatible with the findings of modern science and rational epistemology seemed doomed, or at least doomed to survive only in the seclusion of the individual personality. Much of the thrust of this process of "formal rationalization," as Weber later defined it, had been the byproduct of stringent religious beliefs—notably Protestantism, with its Puritan sects as the outstanding historical example.

Weber argued that at a certain stage of the historical process, the social, economic, and institutional condition brought about by rationalization of this sort tended to gather momentum and become a force on its own. Individuals then had to adjust their conduct to the requirements of the socioeconomic system, regardless of their personal beliefs. Modern society was largely shaped by the advance of rational techniques of a controlling nature, based on the technical know-how provided by modern science. Modern market-oriented industrial capitalism represented its latest stage. At the end of "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism," Weber wrote that individuals now had to conduct themselves as if they were still driven by the religious motives that had helped give birth to modern capitalism. Industrial capitalism and its twin force, bureaucratization, formed an "iron cage" within which mankind would be bound for the foreseeable future. There can be no doubt that, for Weber, American Puritanism provided a blueprint for this model of social change.

Weber ascribed universal significance to the rise of capitalism and its corollaries, formal rationalization and bureaucratization. These forms of social organization, he believed, were infinitely superior to pre-modern versions. He expected them gradually to replace all other models of social organization, and eventually to reshape all the world's civilizations. Weber was far from welcoming this as the fulfillment of an uplifting mission; he

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did not believe in progress of any kind. Yet in his mind there was little doubt that the developmental path of the West led in precisely the direction that he had observed in the United States.

This was not the whole story. Weber would later elaborate and transcend his somewhat unilinear scheme. Instead of a highly bureaucratized, legalistic social order—grounded on the unrestricted operations of market-oriented capitalism, geared to the maximization of productivity at the expense of individual freedom and spontaneity—he posited a far more differentiated ideal model of social change. He still attached great significance to the scheme he had outlined in his earlier writings, but it was now only one among many developmental patterns that he perceived in society at large. The United States was again of prime importance to Weber as he worked out his more complex analyses. Its dynamic political system, its degree of social mobility, its economic strength, its largely untapped economic resources, including its large and ever-growing work force—all these made America the spearhead of his revised developmental scheme.

Weber repeatedly cautioned his countrymen not to underrate the United States politically or economically. In 1916, when the loss of American lives on ships sunk by German U-boats seemed likely to draw the United States into World War I, he insistently warned the German government and Reichstag party leaders that unrestricted submarine warfare could have disastrous consequences. The entry of the United States into the war would not only offset all the shipping losses that U-boats might cause; it would also seal the fate of the Central Powers, which would be unable to match the united forces of the Allies. Never could the Central Powers contend with the almost unlimited resources of the United States, a nation on the verge of becoming the world's predominant economic power. Antagonizing the United States would be tantamount to challenging destiny itself.

His protests had no appreciable effect. Weber saw clearly that the United States' declaration of war, on April 2, 1917, meant that the defeat of Germany was only a matter of time. After the Armistice, in 1919, he advised friends to accept the inevitable and make the best of it: *Amerikas Weltherrschaft war so unabwendbar wie in der Antike die Roms nach dem punischen Krieg* [The rise of the United States to world dominance was as unavoidable as that of ancient Rome after the Punic wars].

Weber's assessment of the United States was not always uncritical. As early as 1905, in his essays on revolution in Russia, he took note of certain advantages that the United States and Russia still enjoyed: both had large, unexploited tracts of land available in an age when the natural resources that had helped fuel capitalist development were starting to wane. But Weber warned that these advantages might not last long. The United

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States, in his view, was in danger of losing at least some of the edge it had gained in the economic and political arenas.

In his St. Louis paper, he had argued that the American government could not carry on for long with an administrative corps largely made up of dilettantes whose jobs were a quid pro quo for services rendered during election campaigns. The heavy hand of bureaucratization would soon be felt in America as well. The United States would also lose the advantage of not having to maintain a large army, as the continental powers, Germany in particular, were forced to do. More generally, American society would not escape the long-term consequences of high capitalism. The progressive implementation of formal rational techniques of social and economic organization, enforced by the mechanics of the marketplace, was inevitably bound up with "material irrationalities"—the erosion of relative equality, an increase in social tensions, and a weakening of the forces of democratization. Weber also held that belief in the specific legitimacy of certain legal norms—in the remnants of natural law still to be found in America—would eventually give way to a purely formal legal order of thought, as had happened in Europe.

In the foreseeable future, Weber believed, the United States would remain at the head of the Western world. The destiny of industrial capitalism depended greatly on how the American economy performed and developed. The future of free societies in the Western world was tightly linked with the ability of the United States to achieve and maintain a genuinely free society. In 1919, Weber bitterly criticized President Woodrow Wilson for failing to exploit America's power potential to secure a just peace and a stable political order in Europe. He blamed Wilson's dogmatism, his shortsightedness, and his deficient understanding of power politics. But, taking a larger view, he still assigned to the United States a major role in paving the way for liberal democracy, and above all in preventing a rebirth of Russian imperialism.

Max Weber was one of the few German observers to grasp the historical significance of the rise of the United States as a major world power. Some of his observations may have been one-sided—some may even have missed the point—but, on the whole, his analysis was subtle and fascinating. Even today it deserves to be taken into account.

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Jump

KARL KIRCHWEY

One day years ago, in full midsummer,
we drove to Berne, my father, my brother and I.
The American Consulate was down by the Aar River,
so I watched the Swiss children as they floated by

from right to left, borne up on the green current
of glacier water, their voices live among
the willow shadows. My mother had died intestate:
that business would be years in the untangling.

My father was settling into a sociable widowerhood.
On the breast of the water, the children made such bright scars.
Each was healed in a moment and disappeared.
Again and again they jumped, with ecstatic cries.

My mother was there one moment, and then she wasn't.
I felt nothing. I watched the River Aar.
I should have stripped and jumped like them, but I didn't,
to loll and spin through the shadow and green water

of a summer day. And now it is too late.
I've been back there, and I mistake the past anyway:
like all narratives, the river flows left to right,
and the willow bank is open to the sky.

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The Soul of Plutarchos

BRIAN DOYLE

As with most of the greatest writers in Western history—Homer, Shakespeare, the gaggle of anonymous geniuses who wrote the Bible—we don't know much about Plutarch of Greece in the usual biographically fussy way. Born in the year 45 A.D. or so, died around the year 120 at perhaps seventy-five years of age, he lived an unimaginably long life at a time when living to fifty was a triumph. He was a student in Athens when the emperor Nero visited there in the year 66; a traveler to Egypt; a visitor for a long period in Rome, apparently on civic business, although he also gave a number of popular lectures as a sort of visiting professor of history and ethics. Back home in Greece and his little native village, Chaeronea, in Boeotia—which he was famously loath "to make less by the withdrawal of even one inhabitant"—for the rest of his many years, he wrote perhaps fifty books while serving as mayor, priest, and inspector of public works (he remarks that his neighbors tease him for "standing by and watching while tiles are measured out and stone and mortar brought up"). There is no firm record of his death, no famous funeral oration by a friend, no deathless stone under which we might find his dignified bones; but if ever a man was surely buried where he was born, it was Plutarch—in his own language, Plutarchos—and Greece's soil is richer for his final return to it.

Thus the skeleton of his life. But let us enflesh him, bring back something of the personality and character of the man, as he saved so many notable men of his time (alas, few women, mostly warrior queens) from desiccated hagiography.

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His wife was Timoxena, and they had at least five children, four sons and a daughter. The oldest son died; a second son, "our beautiful Charon," died; Autobulus and Plutarch the younger lived to manhood; and little Timoxena, "born to your wishes after four sons," as he wrote to his wife, "and affording me the opportunity of recording your name, and a special object of affection," died while yet a child and while her father was traveling. His wife sent messengers, and Plutarch was confronted with the awful news as he arrived in the town of Tanagra.

Imagine our man at this juncture, dusty and tired, an old man by the gauge of his day—he's now a grandfather—standing at the gates of the city. He has lived long and hard, studied under the great Egyptian philosopher Ammonius in Athens, traveled to the great capitals of the known world, worked in Rome, the heart of the empire, where he befriended the best and brightest men of his day. Now, retired from imperial fame and happily become a local lion, he's on the road, perhaps on a lecture tour to scrape up some appearance fees or on a trip to Athens on civic business, to haggle over taxes or tiles. And as he walks in the gate, a man rushes up to him and tells him, *Plutarch, news from Chaeronea, your little daughter Timoxena is dead.*

A taut moment there at the gate, the day sliding into evening, the messenger silent, waiting; and Plutarch's body sagging, dust in his throat, a sudden sharp pain in his belly. After a minute he clears his throat and thanks the messenger, hands him a coin. The man walks off, turning twice to look with rising pity on the famous Plutarch, now bereft of his last-born child and only daughter, the daughter he held alive in his heart only moments before, thinking of her as he walked toward Tanagra, imagining her finishing her bath that afternoon in Chaeronea.

"Plutarch to his wife, greeting," begins the letter Plutarch wrote from Tanagra, possibly that night. "The messengers you sent to announce our child's death, apparently missed the road to Athens. I was told about my daughter on reaching Tanagra." He discusses the funeral, and his conviction of their mutual desire that arrangements be made "apart from all excess and superstition, which no one would like less than yourself. Only, my wife, let me hope, that you will maintain both me and yourself within the reasonable limits of grief. What our loss really amounts to, I know and estimate for myself. But should I find your distress excessive, my trouble on your account will be greater than on that of our loss. I am not a stock or stone, as you, my partner in the care of our numerous children, every one of whom we have brought up ourselves at home, can testify."

The good character and sweet ways of their late daughter make their loss especially painful, he continues, "yet why should we forget the reasonings we have often addressed to others, and regard our present pain as obliterating and effacing our former joys?" And after recalling with admiration the "perfect order and tranquillity" of their home immedi-

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ately after the deaths of their older boys, Plutarch concludes by repeating his conviction that the human soul is immortal, and that we are sustained in loss by the ancient nurturing rivers of clan and religion.

A most curious and revealing letter, this. Let us imagine Plutarch scratching it out, the scritch of his pen and the quiet snapping of an evening fire the only sounds in the room; below him, in the street in the gathering dark, the small sounds of a town closing down for the night. Plutarch has bathed and eaten lightly after his long journey but refrained from proffered wine, mindful of the solemnity of the moment and the hole in his heart; and now he sits sadly by the fire, collects pen and paper, and—and writes at length about the necessity of a tranquil funeral and the avoidance of excessive lamentation? What kind of cold fish is this?

This kind of fish: character was everything to Plutarch, both in his own life—in which he aspired to unrelenting service and rose as high as governor of all Greece and honorary consul of the Roman Empire (according to the reports of Syncellus and Suda) and priest of Apollo at Delphi—and in his literary work, all of which was made, as he said, to explore the souls of his subjects. "My design is not to write histories, but lives," he begins his account of Alexander the Great.

> And the most glorious exploits do not always furnish us with the clearest discoveries of virtue or vice in men; sometimes a matter of less moment, an expression or a jest, informs us better of their characters and inclinations, than the most famous sieges, the greatest armaments, or the bloodiest battles whatsoever. Therefore as portrait-painters are more exact in the lines and features of the face, in which the character is seen, than in the other parts of the body, so I must be allowed to give my more particular attention to the marks and indications of the souls of men, and while I endeavor by these to portray their lives, may be free to leave more weighty matters and great battles to be treated of by others.

But I say that Plutarch did treat of the most weighty matters, those being the hearts and characters of human beings, and that the things he says he will not account—although of course he does account them, in voluminous detail—are of much less weight. It is a matter of historical interest, for example, that Alexander hewed such a vast empire in so few years while so young, and his violent exploit certainly influences and informs modern boundaries and nations in Europe and the Near East; but what do we learn of Alexander by the record of the people he defeated, or by a careful reporting of the military means by which his victories were won? What do we learn of ourselves? That we are capable of ferocious ambition and murder, that we might commit any act for power and glory? This, from experience, we knew.

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Plutarch, however, tells us of the desperately thirsty Alexander who refuses water because there is not enough for all his men—the same Alexander who in a drunken rage spears his friend Clitus through the heart for disagreeing with him; of the munificent Alexander who casually gives away a hundred fortunes to his soldiers—and the bloody Alexander who casually has a hundred prisoners killed to mark the festive occasion as he enters Asia; of the Alexander who as a boy was so temperate with bodily pleasures that "he was with much difficulty incited to them"—and the Alexander who as a man, says Plutarch bluntly, is so "addicted to drinking" that he dies of a roaring fever after a long bender; of the Alexander so little concerned with money that he gives away all his wealth—and the Alexander so concerned with fame that when abandoning a battlefield on the Ganges he deliberately leaves larger-than-life weapons and gear to be found and wondered over; of the Alexander so keenly sensitive of his status as future emperor that he will footrace only with kings—and the Alexander who, at the height of his all-conquering fame, tells his friends that if he were not the peripatetic lord of the known world, he would choose to be the penniless and sedentary philosopher Diogenes.

In short, Plutarch gives us the man's tumultuous heart, even as he chronicles the man's relentless march through life. And the richer tale, the one that truly educates, is of Alexander grappling not with the many nations and peoples he attacks, but with his own incendiary ambition, personal demons, and awful success.

In a sense, Plutarch is the first great modern writer. He is absorbed by the stories of great men as clues to character (great Greek and Roman men only, actually, no Africans or Gauls or Teutons or Egyptians or other members of the Roman Empire need apply); but he is more absorbed by their actions as revelation of the personal than as parable for the public, despite his avowals that the whole thesis of the *Lives* was moral uplift. "Using history as a mirror, I try somehow to improve my own life by modeling it upon the virtues of the men I write about," he writes. "In the study of and writing of history, we receive in our souls memorials of the best. . . . This enables us to drive away and put far from us all the base or corrupt or ignoble influences produced by our associations with those with whom circumstances compel us to mingle. Thus we are enabled to discipline our thoughts and to direct them toward the finest examples of conduct."

I believe him about his motivation; he was a priest, after all, and a man utterly convinced that virtue—personal, civic, and religious—was the keystone of civilization. But I also think that he was too good a literary artist to be satisfied with sermonizing, and that while his overarching theme was the importance of the moral life, the power and allure of his narrative was (and is) his fascination with character, the pressures that formed and revealed it, and the grace with which those pressures were endured.

Homer was after character, too, to a degree—the *Odyssey* is in part a

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character study of its hero, and a powerful image of Odysseus (broad sailor-shoulders, salt-cured face, hawk glare, hard head) stays with a reader for a lifetime. But Homer was primarily after the sweep of historical narrative, whereas Plutarch wanted to explore one man at a time. It may well be that Plutarch's great mission was to leave behind a series of moral lessons, a lively catechism—this is a man, after all, who also wrote a collection of homilies called the *Morals*, as well as three lost books about the soul—but the prime virtue of his *Lives* is not so much their moral uplift as their uncanny personality.

Plutarch's lost books, I note with heartfelt regret, include not only those three volumes on the soul but four books of commentaries on Homer, which certainly must be accounted among the greatest lost treasures of Western criticism. Our contemplating the whole awful list of his missing books (culled from a list of all Plutarch's works attributed to his son Lamprias) is, as John Dryden noted, something like a merchant perusing a bill of freight after he has lost the ship that carried the goods. Among the literary creations no longer in the world, or else hidden in crevices and cellars not yet unearthed, are Plutarch's eight books on Aristotle; six books of essays; four books on history; three books of fables; three books on sense; three books on justice; three books on cities; two books on politics; two books of proverbs; and lives of Hercules, Pindar, Augustus, Claudius, Nero, and Caligula, among others. The mind reels, partly at lost possibility—Plutarch on Augustus, what a match of fine emperor and fine essayist!—but more at the man's sheer industry, at the eye-popping range of his thought, and at the vagaries of history that cast off six books of Plutarch's essays while preserving the muck that infests much of the modern bookshelf.

My own favorite in the *Lives* is the story of Antony, in which Plutarch's art rises to its zenith. Here he has a most remarkable man to explore, a peculiar man in whom swirl all sides of the human character, a man brave and craven at once. And all this courage and cowardice and lust and love is set against the most dramatic and colorful background imaginable—a battle between two mighty generals for the whole Roman Empire, a brilliant and power-hungry enchantress (Cleopatra), the betrayal of friends and nation—the whole nine yards of melodrama and B movies, absent only a swelling soundtrack and Technicolor. Plutarch must have rubbed his hands with glee when it came time to tell of Antony.

"A very beautiful youth," he says of the boy Antony, "but by the worst of misfortunes, he fell into the acquaintance and friendship of Curio, a man abandoned to his pleasures, who plunged him into a life of drinking and dissipation." Antony, of an "ostentatious, vaunting temper, full of empty flourishes and unsteady efforts for glory," does what restless and reckless young men have always done as a desperate corrective: he joins

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the army and pours all his yearning for fame and furious energy into battle.

He leads the Romans against the rebel Aristobulus II and his Jewish army. He conquers Egypt, winning "a great name among the Alexandrians" by preventing a massacre of the losers (that great reputation in Egypt echoing in the ears of a young girl in Alexandria, Cleopatra) and becoming the rising Julius Caesar's right-hand man. By now, grown into his manhood, he has developed a great fame among the common soldiers for dressing, acting, and talking like them and has achieved a reputation as a ladies' man (and "an ill name for familiarity with other people's wives"). His "good humor, generous ways, his open and lavish hand in gifts and favors to his friends and fellow-soldiers, did a great deal for him in his first advance to power, and after he had become great, long maintained his fortunes, when a thousand follies were hastening their overthrow."

So the pattern of Antony's life is set. He is amazingly brave and crafty in battle ("there was not one of the many engagements that now took place one after another in which he did not signalize himself") and amazingly lazy and ill-mannered in private life ("his drinking bouts at all hours, his wild expenses, his gross amours, the day spent in sleeping or walking off his debauches, and the night in banquets and at theaters, and in celebrating the nuptials of some comedian or buffoon"). After Caesar is murdered, Antony vies for the empire with Caesar's nephew Octavian (later Augustus), is defeated at Modena, and is forced to flee Italy.

But "it was his character in calamities to be better than at any other time," observes Plutarch:

> Antony, in misfortune, was most nearly a virtuous man. It is common enough for people, when they fall into great disasters, to discern what is right, and what they ought to do; but there are but few who in such extremities have the strength to obey their judgment, either in doing what it approves or avoiding what it condemns; and a good many are so weak as to give way to their habits all the more, and are incapable of using their minds. Antony, on this occasion, was a most wonderful example to his soldiers. He, who had just quitted so much luxury and sumptuous living, made no difficulty now of drinking foul water and feeding on wild fruits and roots. Nay, it is related they ate the very bark of trees, and, in passing over the Alps, lived upon creatures that no one before had ever been willing to touch.

Eventually Antony returns in force to Italy and divides the empire with Augustus (who changed his name, speculates the historian Suetonius, to distinguish himself from his two sisters, *both* named Octavia). His fortunes restored, Antony slides headlong into debauch again, this time while traveling with his army through Asia. "Such being his temper," writes

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Plutarch, with a nearly audible sigh of frustration, "the last and crowning mischief that could befall him came in the love of Cleopatra," which would eventually "stifle and corrupt any elements that yet made resistance in him of goodness and a sound judgment."

Shakespeare, who leaned heavily on a translation of Plutarch in writing his *Antony and Cleopatra* in 1606, has this account of Cleopatra sailing into Antony's ken for the first time:

> The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne,
> Burned on the water: the poop was beaten gold;
> Purple the sails, and so perfumed that
> The winds were love-sick with them; the oars
> were silver,
> Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke and made
> The water which they beat to follow faster,
> As amorous of their strokes. For her own person,
> It beggared all description: she did lie
> In her pavilion, cloth-of-gold of tissue,
> Over-picturing that Venus where we did see
> The fancy outwork nature: on each side her
> Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids
> With diverse-colored fans, whose wind did seem
> To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool.

(The same passage in Plutarch: "She came sailing up the river . . . in a barge with gilded stern and outspread sails of purple, while oars of silver beat time to the music of flutes and fifes and harps. She herself lay all alone under a canopy of cloth of gold, dressed as Venus in a picture, and beautiful young boys, like painted Cupids, stood on each side to fan her. Her maids were dressed like sea nymphs and graces, some steering at the rudder, some working at the ropes. The perfumes diffused themselves from the vessel to the shore, which was covered with multitudes running out of the city to see the sight.")

We know the tale from that point on: their torrid love affair, Antony's waffling between love and glory, his final battle with Augustus for the world title, his ignominious abandoning of the fight at sea to follow like a puppy at Cleopatra's fleeing keel, his suicide and Cleopatra's subsequent close embrace of the deadly asp. Shakespeare uses their melodramatic tale to make a story of tragic and powerful love; Plutarch, treating the love affair like a virus ("the mischief that had long lain still, the passion for Cleopatra, which better thoughts had seemed to have lulled and charmed into oblivion, upon his approach to Syria gathered strength again, and broke out into a flame . . . "), is, as usual, fascinated by their characters or lack thereof. As clearly as he considers her Antony's bane, he cannot help exploring Cleopatra's charms and delving into what it was

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that made her so mesmerizing not only to Antony but, before him, to Julius Caesar—two of the greatest men of her day.

> For her actual beauty, it is said, was not in itself so remarkable that none could be compared with her, or that no one could see her without being struck by it, but the contact of her presence, if you lived with her, was irresistible; the attraction of her person, joining with the charm of her conversation, and the character that attended all she said or did, was something bewitching. It was a pleasure merely to hear the sound of her voice, with which, like an instrument of many strings, she could pass from one language to another; so that there were few of the barbarian nations that she answered by an interpreter; to most of them she spoke herself, as to the Ethiopians, Troglodytes, Hebrews, Arabians, Syrians, Medes, Parthians, and many others, whose language she had learnt; which was all the more surprising because most of the kings, her predecessors, scarcely gave themselves the trouble to acquire the Egyptian tongue.

Clearly a woman of many parts, who won back the throne of her country from usurping siblings at age seventeen, held it for twenty-two years, and died at thirty-nine by her own hand, bereft of the man she loved and unwilling to be brought as prisoner to Rome, there to be exhibited and chained, in the traditional triumphant march of the conqueror. So passed Cleopatra, queen of the Nile.

Plutarch ends his tale with a dark note; among Antony's descendants was Claudius I, who became emperor, and who adopted Lucius Domitius, "giving him the name Nero Germanicus," says Plutarch. "He was emperor in our time, and put his mother to death, and with his madness and folly came not far from ruining the Roman empire, being Antony's descendant in the fifth generation."

Closing Plutarch after a long voyage among his tales, a reader is awash in a sea of images, the riveting human stories of men long dead brought to magical, immortal immediacy by one man with a relentless pen and a sharp ear. Again and again, Plutarch gives us a small gesture or remark or anecdote that refracts the whole tenor of the man:

The great orator and statesman Cicero perceiving that his death was hard upon him with the arrival of Antony's soldiers, and so commanding his servants to set down the litter in which they were trying to carry him to freedom, "and stroking his chin, as he used to do, with his left hand, he looked steadfastly upon his murderers, his person covered with dust, his hair and beard untrimmed, and his face worn with his troubles . . . and thus was he murdered, stretching forth his neck out of the litter, being now in his sixty-fourth year."

Sylla, who, "when supreme master of all, was often wont to muster

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together the most impudent players and stage-followers of the town, and to drink and bandy jests with them without regard to his age or the dignity of his place."

Pericles, silent, "near his end," surrounded by his friends and family, who are "speaking of the greatness of his merit, and his power, and reckoning up his famous actions and the number of his victories," talking among themselves "as though he were unable to understand or mind what they said, but had now lost all his consciousness"—but Pericles suddenly speaks up and "said that he wondered they should commend and take notice of things which were as much owing to fortune as to anything else, and had happened to many other commanders . . . and not speak or make mention of that which was the most excellent and greatest thing of all: 'no Athenian, through my means, ever wore mourning.'"

Marcius Coriolanus, flipping off the hood that hides his face as he sits at the hearth of Tullus, his bitterest enemy, and offering Tullus and the Volscians his military skills against his native Rome—a breathtaking act of treason, beginning on a stool by a crackling fire with the stroke of a man's hand against the cloth of his cloak.

Callippus, architect of the murder of Dion, himself eerily later killed by the same Spartan-made sword ("the workmanship of it very curious," observes Plutarch meticulously).

The Spartan king Agesilaus, who was "said to have been a little man, of a contemptible presence; but the goodness of his humor, and his constant cheerfulness and playfulness of temper, always free from anything of moroseness or haughtiness, made him more attractive, even to his old age, than the most beautiful and youthful men of the nation."

The Athenians of Demosthenes' time going house to house, searching for stolen treasure, but leaving one house unsearched, that of a newly married couple, "out of respect to the bride who was within." Demosthenes himself, burning to be a great orator but physically "meagre and sickly," afflicted with "a perplexed and indistinct utterance and shortness of breath which by breaking and disjointing his sentences much obscured the sense and meaning of what he spoke." He practiced speeches with pebbles in his mouth, declaimed speeches and verses as he sprinted up hills, and built himself an underground chamber in which to practice for hours every day, "and here he would continue, oftentimes without intermission, for two or three months together, shaving one half of his head, that so for shame he might not go abroad, though he desired it ever so much." *Though he desired it ever so much!*—you can almost taste the boy's furious ambition, and see him sweating and shouting up the hills like a high school football player preparing for two-a-day drills.

Tiberius Gracchus, fleeing his assassins "in his undergarment only," having thrown off his gown, at which his pursuers had clutched as he sprinted through Rome—his death the first sedition to draw blood

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among the Romans since they had abandoned their kings centuries before.

Artaxerxes of Persia, his right hand much bigger than his left; Aratus, at age seven, wandering the disordered streets of Sicyon as his father's killers search for him; Alexander, from whom "a most agreeable odor exhaled . . . his breath and body all over so fragrant as to perfume the clothes which he wore next him."

And Antony, who "went out one day to angle with Cleopatra, and being so unfortunate as to catch nothing in the presence of his mistress, gave secret orders to the fishermen to dive under water, and put fishes that had already been taken upon his hooks." Sharp-eyed Cleopatra, seeing this dodge, arranging for a dried fish to be put on his hook, to the great laughter of onlookers.

Yet as much as a reader's mind is crammed with the thousand characters who populate Plutarch, and agog at the breadth of his detailed and vibrant natural histories of their feats and failures, it increasingly wishes to know the stage manager himself, who is fully as interesting as any of his subjects. There are so many tantalizing clues to the man—the dozens of lost books; the length and nature of his time in the capital of the empire (five years in Rome? forty? diplomat? scholar? no one knows); the extent of his travels; the fact that he kept with him at all times a commonplace book, in which he was often seen to be hurriedly scribbling anecdotes as they drifted by in conversations (Plutarch, the Greek Boswell); his unusual predilection toward monotheism ("Is not one Excellent Being, imbued with reason and intelligence, such as He whom we acknowledge to be the Father and Lord of all things, sufficient to direct and rule?"); his relations with Christianity (Plutarch "had heard of the Christian religion, and inserted several of its mysteries in his books," says the historian Theodoret—imagine a Plutarchian *Life of Paul,* Paul the prickly public relations genius who marketed Christ worldwide, or of Jesus himself—the Gospel according to Plutarch!); his relations with the emperors, especially Trajan, to whom, according to medieval writers, Plutarch sent a legendarily taut, dry-witted recipe for empiring:

> Let your government commence in your breast: and lay the foundation of it in the commands of your passions. If you make virtue the rule of your conduct, and the end of your actions, every thing will proceed in harmony and order. I have explained to you the spirit of those laws and constitutions that were established by your predecessors; and you have nothing to do but to carry them into execution. If this should be the case, I shall have the glory of having formed an emperor to virtue; but if otherwise, let this letter remain a testimony with succeeding ages, that you did not ruin the Roman empire under pretense of the counsels or the authority of Plutarch.

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But, failing the discovery of his lost books, there is no way now of seeing more of the man, and we are left with his counsels and authority, which have been touchstones of Western literature and culture since he wrote them nineteen centuries ago. Ralph Waldo Emerson, a brilliant aphorist but dull essayist who must have gritted his teeth in envy at Plutarch's vibrant prose, had the character himself to sense that the Greek's work would never disappear ("Plutarch's popularity will return in rapid cycles. . . . His sterling values will recall the life and thought of the best minds, and his books will be reprinted and read anew by coming generations. And thus Plutarch will be perpetually rediscovered from time to time as long as books last"). But of all the compliments one might collect for Plutarch, I choose, as John Dryden did in an appendix to his translation of the *Lives* in 1686, one by Theodorus Gaza, "a man learned in the Latin tongue, and a great restorer of the Greek, who lived about two hundred years ago," as Dryden notes. "'Tis said that, having this extravagant question put to him by a friend, that if learning must suffer a general shipwreck, and he had only his choice left him of preserving one author, who should be the man, he would preserve, he answered, Plutarch; giving this reason, that in saving him he should secure the best collection of them all."

Theodorus had his hat on straight here, I think; and of all the literary geniuses in the West these last three millennia, the extraordinary men and women who reached into themselves to tell true of us all, the one in whom nearly all stories may be found is Plutarch. We do not know who Homer was—Samuel Butler famously thought Homer a brilliant young woman—and we are not at all sure who Shakespeare was, the glove maker's son and the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford being the current arm wrestlers for the name. But dimly across nineteen centuries we do see Plutarch the human being, and we sense under his voluminous work the voluminous man, as complex and intricately threaded as any of his subjects: a dignified but warm husband and father, stern but affable neighbor, eloquent statesman and scholar, reverent priest, and most of all—best of all—a genius of a storyteller, a spinner of tales unsurpassed in our recorded literature.

For all his diligence as a scholar and historian digging after the details of the lives and characters of his subjects, Plutarch did spin some tales out of nearly whole cloth (Theseus and Romulus, for example), and he danced around the sparseness of fact with his usual graceful humor:

> As geographers . . . crowd into the edges of their maps parts of the world which they do not know about, adding notes in the margin to the effect, that beyond this lies nothing but sandy deserts full of wild beasts, unapproachable bogs, Scythian ice, or a frozen sea, so, in this work of mine . . . after passing through those periods which probable reasoning can reach to and real history find a footing in, I might very well say of

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> those that are farther off, Beyond this there is nothing but prodigies and fictions. . . . Let us hope that Fable may, in what shall follow, so submit to the purifying processes of Reason as to take the character of exact history. In any case, however, where it shall be found contumaciously slighting credibility, and refusing to be reduced to anything like probable fact, we shall beg that we may meet with candid readers, and such as will receive with indulgence the stories of antiquity.

So to resurrect this most interesting of our ancient cousins, as he resurrected so many others, we make a prodigy and fiction, and beg indulgence of candid readers, and bring Plutarch closer to the camera that we might see the literature of his face and study a bit of his soul. Choose a happy day for the man, on vacation at the coast—mid-September, perhaps, when the weather has just turned a corner and afternoons are russet at the edges, the days still hot but the nights brisk, the ocean darker by the day. Late in the afternoon, Plutarch is scribbling furiously—it's his *Life of Hercules* and it's going *very* well, it's nearly writing itself, everyone has a Hercules story to tell—but his hand is starting to cramp and he pauses, stands, stretches at length like his cat, looks casually out the window toward the sea. Something about the ocean this afternoon makes him lean out his window for a better look—maybe this was how the sea looked, wind-tossed and glittering, to Homer? Or to Odysseus? Now *there* was a man who must have been able to read the moods and hours of the ocean like a book after twenty years at sea, hmm? How would such water-wisdom form a man? Wouldn't he yearn to read faces that way, too, trying to peer under the surface for the weather to come, for the hidden currents, for the shoals, for the jagged dangers?

His meditation is interrupted by two voices, wind-splintered by the growing breeze: wife Timoxena and daughter Timoxena, the child bounding like a deer into his view and laughing through the window, *Father, Father, come out in the light! Come look for whales with me!* And he grins, does Plutarch, unable to resist her verve and glee—the sheer energy of that child, she's got more pepper than all the boys combined!—and he steps out on the bright portico and savors the crisp air, the hot hand of the sun. He stands for a moment with his wife, their arms intertwined, clothes fluttering, daughter dancing in a circle and humming, and they talk of writing and dinner and her cousin in Athens and the foreman who probably did steal those tiles, and they talk about her health—she's been coughing so in the mornings, should they make that trip to Delphi now or wait a bit?—and then little Timoxena trips over the edge of the table as she spins, and she cuts her arm, *Father! It's bleeding!,* and he rocks her in his arms with her head on his chest until suddenly, smiling shyly, she says, *Will you walk with me before dark?* And he says, *Yes of course my tiny flower,* and down the beach they go, father and daughter, hand in hand, immortal.

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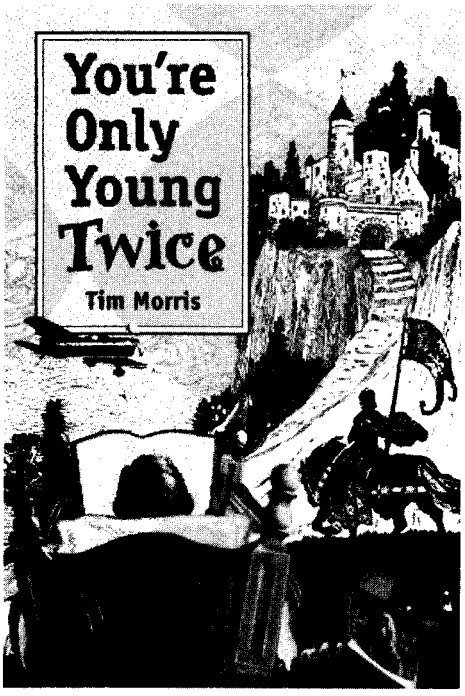

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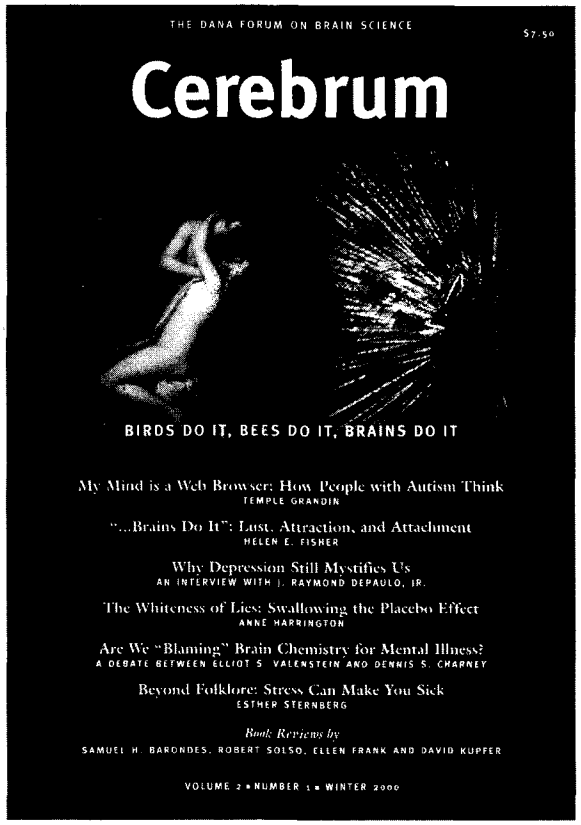

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THE UNCERTAIN ART

Hidden Meanings

SHERWIN B. NULAND

The notion of sympathy between various organs of the body has existed since ancient times. As recently as 150 years ago, in fact, it was still a major influence on medical thought. Physicians theorized that events and qualities—even moods—originated in one structure and affected the behavior of others, usually the ones closest to it. Of course, we now know that something of this sort does indeed take place, not only through the nervous system, but also through blood-borne messengers like hormones.

Yet the kind of sympathy believed in by the ancients and near-moderns was something quite different from the nerve- or hormone-induced physical and chemical activities we study today. In that long-ago era when emotions were thought to originate in various organs (particularly the heart, stomach, liver, and spleen), certain parts of the body were said to commune with one another. The Romans, for example, placed the origin of moodiness and wrath in the stomach and claimed that these feelings appear only secondarily in the heart. At a time when many were convinced that the heart was the seat of the mind, it is not surprising that passions and thoughts were believed to be transmitted between the stomach and the heart by means of the vaguely defined "sympathy" that they shared.

If this is true, reasoned the theorists, then any structure lying between these two major organs must also be imbued with the characteristics that pass from one to the other. Based on this kind of construction, the Greek *phrenes,* the transverse sheet of muscle we call the diaphragm, became the origin of *phren,* meaning "the mind" or "the seat of the emotions." From those beginnings arose *frenetic, schizophrenic,* and *phrenology,* the name of the pseudoscience that purports to diagnose mental and psychological states from the assessment of skull contours.

In such ways does our language reflect the history of medicine and our attempts to understand our bodies and their relation to the cosmos.

Perhaps the richest source of the language that originates in our conceptions about our own inner workings is the theory of humors. There are Greek texts dating from approximately 500 B.C. that describe the dependence of the body's physical and emotional harmony on the balance of four fluids, or humors: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. When the four exist in proper equilibrium, according to the theory, all is well and the individual is healthy and serene. But should one or another of them become either excessive or diminished, sickness ensues, its precise form depending on the nature of the imbalance. Therapy is directed toward restoring the original state of stability.

Blood, for example, warmed by an innate heat supposedly generated in the heart, was said to quicken the spirit. When an illness was characterized by elevated body temperature, flushing, agitation, or perhaps a fast pulse, it was treated by removing some of the excess blood. Such measures as purging, blistering, sweating, emetics, and enemas were employed to rid the body of other imbalances, either by forcing certain humors out of it or by bringing them to the surface. These practices formed the basis of standard therapies until well into the nineteenth century, and continued long afterward in the treatment schemes advocated by grandmothers and other such sages of kitchen wisdom. Mustard plasters,

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cupping, high colonics, and the steam room have a long history in the annals of healing.

According to the original Greek system, it was not only sickness and health that were influenced by the humors. One's personality was affected—to a great extent determined—by the particular baseline combination of the four fluids that was unique to each individual. Since each humor imparted its own characteristics, a person's behavior was a reflection of the way in which the humors were mixed together. As the centuries passed, certain qualities of personality came to be known by the Greek or Latin names of the humors thought to be their basis.

Thus, if someone was lively, or ardent, or optimistic—sanguine, in a word—it was because his dominant humor was blood, for which the Latin is *sanguis.* For reasons shrouded in mystery, yellow bile came to be associated with anger or discontent, resulting in the origin of our word *choleric,* from the Greek *chole,* or "bile." When someone is bilious, he can thank the Latin *bilis* for that designation, unless he is so confrontational that he has too much gall to thank anyone for anything. As for *phlegmatic*—it speaks for itself, especially when one considers that phlegm was thought to come from the brain. There is a bit of a paradox here, or at least an inconsistency, because the loss of phlegm (meaning the loss of brain) rather than its excess was believed to be the reason that some people become dull and sluggish, or perhaps just imperturbable.

Black bile has a story all its own. The other three humors are easily visible under appropriate circumstances, but black bile was an enigma. It had been added to the other three in order to achieve some symmetry in a formulation that might be called "the notion of fours." This thesis had been brought forth by the fifth century B.C. philosopher Empedocles, who declared that everything in the universe is made up of varying combinations of air, earth, fire, and water. If this is so, and if there are four seasons, the number of humors must also be four—but what to do with the fact that only three were readily identifiable? The solution, in more ways than one, was to invent a fourth. No one knows who hit on the idea of black bile, but it sounds like the kind of thing dreamed up by a committee. Subsequent generations tried to prove its existence by pointing to what they considered visible evidence, like the blackish exudations that sometimes ooze from tumors and sick organs, but such arguments were recognized as weak, if not patently specious. The fact is that there is no such thing as black bile, though no Greek-influenced thinker would ever admit it.

Having brought it into the world despite its imaginary nature, the ever-resourceful doctors and philosophers had to associate the mythical humor with an organ. If the heart had its blood, the liver its yellow bile, and the brain its phlegm, what structure could possibly make the best domicile for black bile? The answer, as obvious as it was, seemed too good to be true. Tucked up under the left side of the rib cage was a fist-shaped, dark-hued collection of flesh whose function no one had ever been able to fathom. Though the Greeks and preceding civilizations had assigned a job to virtually every other viscus, the spleen was without identifiable employment. Perhaps in desperation, Aristotle called it "a bastard liver," but others disagreed. In the second century A.D., Galen would come to refer to it as *plenum mysterii organum,* "the organ full of mystery," and suggest fanciful roles for it in the general economy of the body.

Being without any other certain function, and deep purplish red in color—becoming much darker the moment blood stopped flowing through it—the spleen seemed the perfect location for the origin of black bile. The organ's funereal color contributed verisimilitude to its humor's fictional role, the formation of disposition and personality: a surfeit of black bile was the cause of melancholy. In fact, the very word comes directly from the Greek theories of human biology. Since *melas* is "black," barely a short skip reaches the derivation of "melancholy" from *melas* and *chole.*

The association of melancholy with the spleen had great appeal to people of succeeding eras. The word *spleen* eventually became the name of a disease, which, judging by its characteristics as described in medical and lay literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was identical to the spectrum of symptoms we nowadays call depression. But something had been added along the way. Perhaps because of an intuitive recognition of the

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psychological relationship between depression and anger, the expression "to have an attack of the spleen" was often used to mean that the person in question was angry or discontented—in other words, splenetic. The best way to avoid overt manifestations of such a state of mind was to "vent one's spleen," which in essence meant opening up the organ to allow escape of the accumulated black bile.

Black bile is the most storied of the humors, but blood, long recognized as the carrier of the vital energy, is the most dramatic. One of the earliest interpretations of physiology—one that must have been made even by the thinking predecessors of *Homo sapiens*—was that blood carries the life-giving force. An injury resulting in considerable loss of blood was seen to leave its victim seriously weakened; if enough of the rich red fluid exited the body, life itself went with it. To the first healers, the huge spongy liver appeared to be choked with blood, and was therefore believed to be the site where blood was manufactured. If this were so, the liver must indeed be the seat of life, a notion that would find linguistic expression in the Indo-European root *leip,* a term associated also with the concept of being alive. It is from this source that the word *liver* originates, as does the word *life* itself. In German, the organ is called *die Leber,* and the verb "to live" is *leben.* Our language has inherited the ancient notion that the liver is the organ that makes it possible for us to live.

Of all the words that ancient medical theory has contributed to the vocabulary of modern English, there is none whose original meaning—or at least a close approximation—persisted as long as *hysteria.* Its origin is to be found in the uterus, for which the Greek word was *hystera.* Civilizations long before theirs had attributed magical powers to the reproductive organs, but the *hystera,* concealed deep within the female pelvis, had a lore all its own. It was said to roam throughout the body, unrestricted by such natural boundaries as the diaphragm or the upper rim of the chest. It might lodge like a globular obstruction in the throat, a condition that in time came to be called *globus hystericus;* when feeling acutely overheated, it leaped toward the abdominal wall, hoping to be cooled by the outside air; if the problem was thirst, it would throw itself forcefully at the liver in order to be moistened by the nearby humors. Leaping and plunging were not its only means of locomotion: sometimes the uterus would meander in a leisurely fashion around the inside of a woman's body, seeking, seeking—who knows what it was seeking, or why?

Plato thought he had the answer. In *Timaeus,* he asserted that the organ acted out of frustration with its unfulfilled desire to nurture new life. Calling it "an animal within an animal," he proclaimed as certainty a theory already accepted by many earlier students of the subject: "When it remains unfertilized for a long time during the proper season the uterus becomes seriously angry and moves all over the body." Others claimed that the frustration arose from a cause prior to fertilization. It was the sexual act itself, they declared, and all of the pleasures attendant on it that were missing from the life of the *hystera.* The set of symptoms caused by uterine peregrinations became known as hysteria, and they were assumed to have a sexual cause.

Those symptoms covered a wide range, attributable to the erratic movements of the uterus. A woman's otherwise unexplainable abdominal pain, choking, shortness of breath, fainting, heartburn, headache—all these were due to hysteria, according to the physicians of the classical period, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and beyond, almost to our own time. As late as 1979 the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association* still listed "Hysterical Neurosis" as a disease. In the Association's defense, it must be said that precious few psychiatrists seem to have had any idea of the origin of the term. We are thus confronted with the ludicrous spectacle of an entire learned profession pleading ignorance to avoid blame.

There seems little doubt that some symptoms now placed within the broad category of "psychosomatic," or perhaps designated by the far more restricted term "conversion reaction," can in certain cases be traced to sexual conflicts. This is a far cry from the assurance with which physicians of earlier eras viewed the disease they called hysteria. They did not hesitate to base their therapies on the millennia-old conception, as it were. If a patient was

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married, they prescribed pregnancy; if not, she was to be sexually satisfied by clinical means. Until the turn of the twentieth century, manual doctor-induced orgasm was an accepted therapy. The vibrator, in fact, was invented with this very clinical purpose in mind. Those who view with nostalgia that earlier time before instruments replaced the doctor's touch might look on such an innovation as a mixed blessing.

The induction of pregnancy and orgasm were treatments of the kind that a modern physician would call "interventional." But simpler means were sometimes used to achieve much the same objective, while avoiding the laying on of hands. Being an animal, reasoned the ancients, the uterus should be attracted by pleasant smells and repelled by noxious ones. All manner of concocted vapors were inhaled through the nose or wafted up into the vagina to induce the smell-sensitive organ to move down into the pelvis. Ambroise Paré, the renowned sixteenth-century French surgeon, recommended "sweet and aromaticke fumigations" emanating from a long-necked metal vessel under which a fire was lit. A detailed drawing in his widely read textbook, translated into English in 1634, depicts the vessel, fire and all, positioned between a standing woman's widespread legs. Fumes flow upward from a mixture of cinnamon, lavender, benzoin, pennyroyal, calamine, nutmeg, musk, "and such like, which for their sweet smell and sympathy, allure or entice the wombe downewards."

The male reproductive organs, too, are not without their contribution to etymology. The flower we call an orchid derives its name from its ball-shaped double root, the sight of which brings to mind the Greek word *orchis,* meaning "like a testicle." When a man is in a hospital awaiting orchiectomy, he is not about to have flowers removed from his room. Rather, he is scheduled for excision of his testicles, a procedure not infrequently indicated in the treatment of prostate cancer.

Some men would rather lose their souls than their testicles. In earliest times and in societies we call primitive, the loss of the soul, followed by its immediate retrieval, was thought to be a common occurrence. The underlying philosophy that made such an event possible was the notion that humans, being part of the cosmos, are made of the same materials as everything else in the universe. To the Greeks, these were the aforementioned air, earth, fire, and water. In their formulation, the entire cosmos is motivated and energized by a poorly defined power that is variously called soul, spirit, pneuma, psyche, anima (there are small differences in the meaning and usage of these words, but for the purposes of this essay they are interchangeable), and several other names, depending on the culture. Being a microcosm of the macrocosm, each of us derives our soul from the soul of all that surrounds us in the universe—we bring it inside ourselves by the act of breathing. *Psyche,* or *psuche,* in fact, Greek for "soul" or "spirit," is derived from an Indo-European root that refers to breathing. Throughout history, a sneeze has been thought to propel the soul out of the body. Though we think of this concept as a superstition nowadays, it had the blessing (in more ways than one) of orthodox philosophy in Greek-influenced societies. The best way to get the soul back was to utter some slogan that was essentially a prayer. And from this comes "Gesundheit" and "God bless you." These ancient confabulations die hard. Try leaving the proper formula unsaid the next time a friend sneezes, and note how the anxiety level rises until the magical saying has been uttered.

So God bless you all, and Gesundheit. This talky tale is done, along with whatever lesson may be found in it. Alas, the day of the philologist is long past. The history of our culture is hidden in the unexamined history of our words, and there it will remain. We let them fly from our lips heedlessly, without a moment's wonder.

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JOURNAL

Provincetown

DAVID MICHAELIS

Two weeks ago, I heard my phone twittering in the dusk. It was Alec Wilkinson, calling from Truro to ask if I would introduce him at his reading at the Provincetown Art Association on August 8. I told him I wanted a night to think it over, but I could already feel the gritty sand-scored floorboards of the Art Association under my feet. This is what I thought: It's time I went back to P-town.

In Boston, 5:30 A.M. The gulls shrieking over Boston Harbor. Before leaving A Street, I read my grandfather Ordway Tead's essay about Provincetown, "Remembrance of Things Past." His father, the Reverend Edward Sampson Tead, a Congregational minister from Somerville, Mass., had taken the family each July to Provincetown, where my great-grandfather served as the summer preacher in the local parish. Each year on July 1, my grandfather and his brother Phillips would be up at 5:30 in the morning, shivering with excitement about taking the steamer from Boston to the Cape.

Big blue dome over Boston, sun rising behind the steeples of Southie. Down the Southeast Expressway. At the bottom of Quincy comes the big fork: Go right for Route 95, Providence, and NYC. Go left for Pilgrim's Highway, Cape Cod, and the Islands. The road to New York brings back the whole sense of exile I've lived with ever since we sold the house in Provincetown to pay Mom's estate taxes—that whole epoch in the eighties when it seemed as if we had been banished. But now, for a moment, the old pattern of life seems once more vouchsafed for me: I turn with a great rush of feeling onto Pilgrim's Highway. I'm going home. I'm driving down to the Cape.

I don't know why I feel so guilty about having lost the house in P-town. I never seem able to forgive myself because I always know that, in fact, Choate, Hall and Stewart's distress sale was avoidable. We had a choice. My mother's house in Cambridge could have been sold, though in cash value the loss would have been greater had we sold 19 Berkeley Street in the pits of the real estate market of 1982. I remember it every time I drive through Boston: the way my brother and I sat up there in the cool, collected conference room at the law firm, agreeing with everyone that it was a luxury for a couple of guys in their early twenties to own beach-front property on Cape Cod. And so we sold the thing we loved more deeply than any other.

Now here I am sailing across the Sagamore Bridge to Cape Cod and Provincetown. The word by itself, the length of it on the green roadside sign, the many jumbled letters, gives me a sudden glimpse of the whole town. It's the first glimpse I've really allowed myself. I really see it: Provincetown, lying flat on the harbor, surrounded by the vast plains of the Atlantic, the Pilgrim monument silhouetted against the equally vast sky. "The long, slender, dearly beloved town," as my grandfather called it in his memoir.

I stop for coffee and a bran muffin at a new Friendly's beside the bridge rotary. Even before getting out of the car, I can smell the salty air, the whiff of bayberry. I wipe my eyes. It's 8:30 in the morning, and I am already welling up. It is going to be a long day.

At Orleans, I swing around the rotary and head north on Route 6. This is the last leg. After the Wellfleet Drive-In, the road is dense

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David Michaelis, the author of *N. C. Wyeth: A Biography*, lives in Washington, D.C. He wrote this journal entry on Cape Cod during the afternoon and night of August 8, 1991.

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with the sites and sights of my childhood. There's the Wellfleet A&P, the parking lot where, one rainy day, at age seven, I got hit by a car and cut by its silver hood ornament at the corner of my (right) eye. The A&P is now the IGA, and I have to check the car mirror to see which eye it was. There's the turnoff for Wellfleet Center and for Gull Pond Road—the Sluiceway! And here is Truro, already. My God, it's all here, it's all the same, but it's not. The Package Store is still the Package Store, but Schoonie's isn't Schoonie's and Gilbert Seldes isn't lying abed in a small white-clapboard house and I am not being taken in to say hello to the great man at his smelly bedside. And yet here is the sign for Corn Hill, which therefore must still exist, and for Highland Light, whose flashing sequence I used to count from my bunk window in Provincetown.

I start feeling queasy. Not exactly carsick, but somehow ill, not quite myself. The road is hilly in this part of North Truro, but it's not the rolling motion of the car that's making me uneasy. It's not so much what's here as what is *not* here. I keep expecting to see certain vistas open up across the tops of the scrub pine. They are not places you'd find on the map. They are those scenes that, because of annual pilgrimage, become even more affirming of place than the shrines marked by big green reflective signs. I am looking for The Land That Grandma and Grandpa Owned. I am looking for The Bluff Over the Bay With the Edward Hopper House. And for The Field Where We Stopped When the Dog Had to Upchuck. It all seems to have vanished. But then, when I come to a certain point in the road, which we thought of as The Place Where Mom Always Says Whee!, I realize what's happened. Mom always said Whee! because that was the point in the road where we could first see P-town after a year's absence. The reason I can't see P-town from this point in the road is that the trees have grown, they're no longer scrubby.

At the crest of Pilgrim Heights, I come apart a little. I begin sobbing the minute I see it—Provincetown, low and long and clear, a world afloat between sky and sea. To my right is Pilgrim Lake and behind it the dunes, stretching out across the narrow spine of land. To my left, dotting the shore road and the bay, strands of matching cottages, tiny, clapboard necklaces looping from North Truro around to P-town. This is the very last piece of northbound road, before you turn west. I'm driving and blubbering and blubbering and driving. I'm making sounds I haven't heard me make since the time of Mom's death, ten years ago in December. My skull hurts. I can't find the ENTERING PROVINCETOWN sign—the one that always got my brother and me into a fight (like Ordway and Phillips before us), a contest to see who could get his foot deepest into the car's heating duct and claim to have been first into P-town.

Now I know why my grandfather stopped his lovely memoir at the point of arrival. It's just too much. I feel as if I'm dying, or dead already. I pass the water tower, then the roadside dunes—the shrunken Sahara of my childhood. I slow down to make the left-hand turn onto Snail Road, which goes south two or three tenths of a mile before it rejoins Route 6A at the water's edge. I turn, cross the highway, and start down Snail Road. I wish I were a snail, so I could duck back into my shell—back into the life I've improvised since my mother's death. None of my life since 1982 has been real—I feel that suddenly now on Snail Road. I feel completely naked. About halfway down the road, I think: Maybe I really should just turn back, forget it, go back to Wellfleet. But in another second I see the water. This was always the moment when Mom took her hands off the steering wheel and clapped them together. Often she wept.

Provincetown forms a bowl around the sea. The East End, where I'm making landfall, and town center and the West End and all the sandy way around to Long Point form a slender rim. The seaward horizon and the bayside of Wellfleet and Truro complete the rim. If you go out on the water here, or, when the tide is out, if you walk out onto the flats, you feel as if you are in the exact center of creation, suspended in a sphere of light between the dome of sky and the bowl of sea. The land is a line on the horizon, not much more. You can feel the roundness of the planet and the continuousness of the cosmos. The light is the light of miracles. The water is clear and blue and green, so full of salt and shellfish that when you smell its smell you don't think so

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much of the seaside as of life itself. When, after ten years away, I drive back up to the edge of this bowl of light and water, I instantly dissolve back into it, like powdered remains, white bone fragments, tossed onto water.

I park the car at HoJo's, which is now called Basil's. A can of root beer takes some of the dread out of my stomach. I walk over to the waterside, back at the beginning of the East End, before the tightly spaced houses begin their long march down Commercial Street. It is a glorious day, cloudless, high summer. The water has a sparkle on it. I stand on a sandy spot above the shorefront, and the sea comes up to meet me. The sound of it, the smell of it—it fills me up instantly. I don't know why, but the sea here is so much more completely the sea than almost anywhere else I have ever been. P-town, I keep thinking, this is P-town. I feel myself coming to life, as if a dead limb had been sewn back onto my body and pumped full of fresh salty blood.

I take a deep breath and start down Commercial. I walk in the street, as always, and I pass by the Zinbergs', which has a big FOR SALE sign out front: Dorothy selling after Norman's death? I pass by the Florsheims', also dead. I pass by the Romanos', where I first kissed a girl, Jill Kearney, in a spin-the-bottle game. At the Kearneys', a flock of bumper-sculpture animals materializes in my memory, like extinct creatures in a child's pop-up book. At the Motherwells', the name of the house—a name I have neither heard nor thought of for ten years—offers itself as if it were still part of my everyday mental furniture: Sea Barn. It's all shut up now, following Robert Motherwell's death last month, and the memorial service on the flats, which I read about in the *Times*. After Sea Barn comes Harmony, Lily Harmon's house. And then the Friedmans' unnamed house, now the Mailers', with a big black BMW parked out front. Then comes Bissell's and Huber's Hut, and the Packards', and across on the back side of Commercial, facing the water across its parking lot and beach, the White Dory Inn, which is now condominiums. Beside the White Dory stands the Atkins Cottage, where my grandparents spent their honeymoon seventy-six years ago this July.

I can't bring myself to look at the next house on the water. It's crazy, but I feel that if I see this most unimaginable sight—my house, our house, inhabited by us in another time—then I will know what it is like to be dead, or never to have lived at all. And the strangest part is that here, under this sun, and with the wind blowing the sea into my brains, I have always felt completely alive, a fully sentient being restored to my original (which may also be my final) state.

After Mom died, I had recurring dreams for the first time in my life. There were several. The fish dreams. Also the dream of amputation. And the dream where Mom would turn to stone when I kissed her. About once a year for ten years I have had a dream that takes place in our house in Provincetown. There are variations, but the dream always starts the same way. Mom and I are at the window next to the bathroom, and Mom is agitated because she looks out and sees cars parked on our lawn. Then, when she sees that in fact the lawn has been turned into a parking lot, covered in gray spalls, she gets furious and demands to know what has happened. Sometimes she asks what those people think they are doing or why there is a car out there with a Pittsburgh license plate, black with white letters. In any event, she's mad, and I'm the one who's got to tell her that we don't own the house anymore.

Sometimes she receives this news philosophically. When I first had these dreams, right after we sold the house in '82, Mom got very angry. She was baffled, outraged, shaking with fury: "What do you mean, WE DON'T OWN THE HOUSE? Of course we do, Dave! It's our house, Grandma and Grandpa's house, and now it's your house. Don't be silly." She would get so carried away, there was only one thing to do to defuse her: Tell her she was dead. In real life, when Mom was in the hospital, dying of cancer, no one broke this news to her. No one ever said: Diana, you're dying. You are going to be dead soon. Is your will in order (it was not), have you taken all the necessary steps? We all acted as if strong-willed Mom would survive. In my recurring dream, when I told her the news that she was dead, Mom would always take it with a smile and a wave, just as she had taken her disease in life. Then she would turn from me, turn away from the

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window, and start up the stairs. And I always knew that she was going back to the dead because her feet weren't touching the stairs and I could see her heels floating upward.

The side of the house looks exactly the same. The shingles are gray and weathered. Not a single window on the east end of the house looks altered. The seaside deck has the same railing and the same bulkhead. This sounds like a pretty sober description—as if I'm standing there on Commercial Street, looking at my old house with a cool, dry eye. In fact, all I really give the house is a glance—before suddenly noticing that the lawn and privet hedges facing the street are gone, replaced by a parking lot with gravel spalls. Several cars are parked in this mini-lot, although none with Pittsburgh license plates. The house has also been christened by its new owners. To us it had always been simply "619." But now it has a name; and there it is in purple letters: LEVITATION. Just as I am turning away, a woman walks out the front door onto the porch. I turn fast.

Completely undone, I float on down Commercial. David Mayo has built a big house beside ours, filling in what was always a vacant seaside lot. Someone else has squeezed an awful house—big and boxy, with a flat-topped roof—between Mayo's and the old Mervyn Jules place: *two* houses where before there was none. Up the street, a fancy hotel with pink umbrellas and white tables has replaced Rosy, the raffish '70s hangout where we met for nightcaps. I pass the small white gate that led through the rosehip-fragrant path to the Tennis Club. And Howie Schneider's house, and Susan Sinaiko's. And the Ship's Bell sign, and the glass telephone booth that used to be in front of the sign. And here is Number One Conway Street—Anna Lewis's house.

I walk up to the gate and stand there without deciding to do anything. The lawn chairs under the trees in the front yard look cool and welcoming. There's some laundry hanging on the line. Flowers border the white picket fence. Inside the small, shingled house, the TV chatters. I can hear Anna eating lunch alone in front of the television. I'm not sure what to do, whether to continue on into town, or whether to seek refuge here. I've actually never set foot inside Anna's house. All our conversations took place at 619 Commercial or at the gate where I am standing now.

The front door is open, the screen door secure. I call out Anna's name in a small, choked voice. "Yes?" she replies, and I would know that rough, mannish voice anywhere. But when she comes to the door, she does not know me. Her flashing gaze looks right through me. "Anna," I say, "it's David." In a low, nearly inaudible voice, she says, "Oh my gawd." Then, without hesitation, "Come in, come in, dear."

There are four chairs in Anna Lewis's living room, and they tell the story of her life. Her mother, Wilhelmina Enos, sat in one. Her husband, Manuel J. "Mannie" Lewis, sat in another. Anna sat in a third. The fourth was her father's. He died when Anna was twelve, and now that chair is for company. We cover a lot of ground quickly, starting with the changes at 619 Commercial. As Anna talks her eyes seem always to stray to the horizon, sweeping back and forth. But in fact you can't see the sea from Anna's living room. I guess if you've lived in P-town all your life, as Anna has, that line of sea and sky is probably imprinted on your brain. Anna remembers what the East End was like when Eugene O'Neill and John Dos Passos were her neighbors. When she worked on the old Hilliard's Wharf. When she used to open the house for the Sternes and the Teads. And when she closed it up for Mom, for the last time, that last October. After she spoke with Mom on the phone and heard the sound in her voice, she went home and cried and said, "Oh, Diana, this is it." After a while, we come back to the present. "Well," she says, "if you're going to see town, you'd better go now, or you may never get there."

Back on Commercial Street. It's like having some hallucinogen reactivated in my brain. This again—Provincetown, ten years later. Oh my God, there's the Cape Codder sign. And the Silvas', which is for sale. Tillie's is all boarded up. The icehouse has become ICE HOUSE CONDOMINIUMS. But Long Point Gallery still looks the same, as does the Patrician Shop, and the playground outside it, where, once, as a six- or seven-year-old boy, I thought I'd lost Mom, and so, quite solemnly, lay down in the sand to die, and cried and cried in deepest despair, until Mom returned

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from wherever she'd gone, and picked me up in disbelief.

Involuntarily, I keep looking for the town that was here when I first knew P-town—the tough, tolerant, blue-collar P-town. It seems finally to have sold out to the tourist trade. Arnold of Arnold's TV and appliance store gets a better return on his property by renting it out to a T-shirt merchant; same for Duarte's Motors and a dozen other old businesses in town center. The Fo'c'sle, the joint I always thought of as the darkest, meanest bar in the world—hangout for local toughs, burnouts, fishermen, and visiting Hell's Angels—has become a tame tourist bar, all watered-down. Then again, there was always a layering of P-towns—the P-town of the day-trippers and tourists, of the gays and cross-dressers, of the artists and writers, of the summering shrinks, of the hippies and conservationists, of the year-round Off-Cape transplants and drifters, and of the dancing policeman, who still leaps and pirouettes, choreographing traffic at the heart of town. The P-town I'm looking for, the dark, smiling P-town of the Portuguese, was always a little hidden by clannishness anyway.

On the front side of the "front street," as my grandfather called Commercial, Lands End Marine, the great nautical and fishing tackle emporium of my boyhood, is still open for business, and I am glad to see it. In the heat of the sidewalk, I pass by the screen doors, inhaling the cool sweet perfume of vulcanized rubber, hemp, tar, creosote, varnishes. The uncanny sensation comes over me once more: I feel as if I were discontinued, like a car that's still on the road but for which there are no longer parts. I feel as if my soul never left, but my mind and body no longer belong. My brain is telling me that I'm here, I'm back. It's me again—back in P-town! And yet it's not me exactly, neither the prelapsarian me nor the me I've become in exile. In flashes, it's so easy, so seductive, to see myself here again. If I had a son, a boy at my side, I'm sure I would project all my feelings onto him. It would be the natural thing. The boy would become the boy I no longer am. He would ensure the continuity of these seaside summers. I could give up all this guilt I feel about losing the house, breaking the chain. But I don't have children. I am neither son nor father. I am a freak of nature, a pilgrim, a time-traveler.

I turn toward MacMillan Wharf, skirting the lines, the swirling midday crowds, and start out onto the pier. Suddenly I'm glad that I've made my pilgrimage on a dazzling day in high summer. My head is spinning in the bright clean air, the salty smell of the sea, and the mingling aromas of frankfurters, deep-fried clams, warmed-up asphalt, and fudge. The tide is high. The deep green water fills in under the tall barnacled pilings. The Boston boat has just tied up and the day-trippers are streaming landward off the pier. I continue seaward, insanely relieved to find that there are still boys diving for money—the immemorial racket of challenging tourists to "chuck a nickel ov-ah!" They are not the boys (including the harbormaster's son) who swamped Jackson's dinghy and flung it off the end of the wharf the summer we tried to poach coins in these Portuguese diving waters. But the tide is high, the harbor is deep, the Boston boat is in, and it's the same racket and they are the same boys. Huddling in their wet cutoff trunks on the pier's wooden lip, shivering, hair slicked back, brown bodies glistening, they peer through the sun-sparkle, studying the green water for the silvery lie of coins in the sandy bottom. The debate is still the same: whether that's a quarter down there in the sand, or just a dime. And they still complain when someone tosses pennies; and they still stand authoritatively, like little pirates, on the cleats and fastened lines of the boats; and they still answer the eternal tourist's question—"How deep is it down there?"—with the eternal boy's deep-voiced answer: "Deep."

The fish-packing warehouse is gone from the end of the pier, and what was once a world of shadows and ice-filled wooden crates and wet, cool, fish-smelling passageways is now ablaze with sunshine. I stand there, astounded. For ten years I have been walking past fish markets in New York, Halifax, Vineyard Haven, County Cork, Porto Ercole, Sag Harbor. Once, outside the Rosedale Fish Market on Lexington Avenue, as I ran to catch the crosstown bus on 79th Street, I stopped dead in my tracks. From the open door came the cold, clean market smell, and I solemnly told myself: Yes, that's P-town. That's what the wharf

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smelled like, back behind the harbormaster's office, back where my brother and I, no more than seven or eight years old, with Mom standing by, fished for tinker mackerel with hand lines and silver jigs. For ten years I have comforted myself with the lie that other places are this place. But now I smell it, the real thing, and there is nothing like it. There is no place like this in the world, and I don't know what to do. I don't know where to go next.

I get as far as the post office, then turn back toward the East End. I feel as if I'm dying again. I'm either going crazy or just exciting my overexcitable appetite for loss. No wonder I was so moved by visiting the Etruscan tombs in Tarquinia. Maybe next summer I should visit Sioux burial grounds.

I'm dumb with hunger. I haven't eaten since the bran muffin at the bridge, hours ago. But when I come upon the Penny Patch, the candy store of my childhood, I think I'm ready to be gratified. Electric fans are blowing a warm, fudgy aroma out onto Commercial Street. I enter the shop and take a basket. It feels wonderfully inviting and familiar in my ungainly hand, this little wicker basket for penny candies. And I have money—boy, do I have a lot of pocket money. What an allowance. I move forward into the velvety warm Wonka world of candy. The floor-to-ceiling shelves are a riot of fireballs, root beer barrels, jawbreakers, licorice twists, jelly beans, Boston Baked Beans, chocolate babies, anise drops, Tootsie Rolls, Bits-O-Honey, Mary Janes, white rock candy. Everything looks excitingly the same. Everything *is* the same: the same squares of fudge, the same dumb boxes of saltwater taffy, the same trompe l'oeil "beach pebbles" Grandma sent me in camp. Suddenly I don't want to eat any of it. I'm ragingly, foamingly hungry. I haven't a clue what I'm doing in here. I can't eat fudge for lunch. I'm thirty-three years old. What am I thinking? Atomic Fire Balls? Rainbow Jaw Breakers? I've got to get back to 1991. Nauseous, sick of myself, I put down my empty basket and walk out of the Penny Patch.

The craziest thing is that I'm all memoried out and I have not yet even set foot on the beach or in the bay. On my way back from town, I cut across the Episcopal church parking lot opposite vanished Tillie's. I sit down on the break wall, take off my sneakers and socks, and leap to the sand. I take a step. My god, I say aloud, it's the sand. The sand. What I mean is: I never knew before that even the sand here has a particular texture, a springiness, which, for me, is sand. All these years away on other beaches I've been misled. I bend over and peer at the smooth, coarse, yellow, orange, brown, blonde, and black particles under my toes. So much of memory is invention, but this I know: this is sand.

The tide is going out. I walk in the shallow, receding water, floored by the sense of recognition. The water is so clear and lovely. Every crab seems known to me, every waving shank of sea grass, even the rufous color of certain spots on the beach, such as the stretch outside Gary Silva's old house and over by the Rossmores'. I keep thinking I must be going out of my mind.

The closer I get to the beach side of 619, the weirder I feel. All along this home stretch, people are sitting on their decks, sunning, reading. I can hear the rattle of a spray-paint can; someone is stenciling a chest of drawers. The decks and houses are as familiar as my toenails, but the sunbathers are strangers. This is the summer community I grew up in, and this is a summer day, and the only person I recognize is Norman Mailer, whom anyone would recognize. I've never felt more alien anywhere in all my life. The tide is sloughing out under my knees, so I walk further out, past the jetties, further and further away from shore. I notice that the Big Rock, the tall chunky slab of granite at the end of our jetty, about which I have literally dozens of memories, all keyed to the different heights of the tides, has fallen onto its side. The Big Rock is where we scattered our old dog's ashes in 1980, my mother and brother and I. Each of us took some peppery white dust from the strange small container. Pooey's death was the practice death; his ashes, practice throws. Grandma went next. Then Mom.

Ironically, after gorging myself on every fish hook and sinker in town, I now can't bring myself to look directly at any of the details around 619. The overall shapes—rock, jetty, beach, house—are all I can manage. It's like being at a party when an old lover walks in the room. The more intimate you've been with the

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object of your desire, the greater its power, ultimately, to alienate. Now that I am here, all I know is I need to get into the water. I don't even need to swim. I just want to lie in the outgoing water. I've worn my bathing suit under my shorts, so changing isn't a problem. Even so, I've got to find somewhere to leave my shorts and shirt and sneakers. And just as I'm puzzling this over, wondering if I have the guts to leave my stuff up on the beach (Mom's voice in my ear: "Can't those day-trippers read the sign: PRIVATE BEACH/NO TRESPASSING?"), I see Susan Packard. She's directly ahead, in the same stretch of thigh-deep water where I'm sloshing around. It's Susan, all right. She looks exactly the same. The girl next door. She's wearing a two-piece bathing suit, and she's running out into the receding water. Her whole body is pitched forward, her hair in flight, and I have an urge to rush up, throw my arms around her, and thank her. As with the sand, the water, the jetties, the crabs, I'm astonished to the point of gratitude to rediscover my knowledge of this particular girl's particular way of running out of her house and into the water. It locates me.

I approach Susan, both of us knee-deep in the water, and I can see that she remembers me but does not quite know who I am. To identify myself, I point to my house. I don't know why I don't speak first or say my name—I just point like a six-year-old at my house. Susan shrieks a little when she understands. She jumps up in the water. Her gleaming brown hair tosses around her shoulders, her eyes burst with light. Then something intrudes a little on her openness. Maybe I'm not what I seem to be. Maybe I'm—who knows, an apparition, a monster? Anyway, there is this moment of suspense. It's hard to describe, but for a moment we are held on a point of time that seems to contain the possibility of all other points of time. Suspended there, together, our feet in the blue water, our heads in the blue sky, there seems an infinity of potential. Love, pity, sorrow—anything might happen now between Susan Packard and me.

Susan, it turns out, is a schoolteacher in California. She's back visiting her mother, and she seems as struck all over again by P-town as I am. Her memories, which she discusses freely, are all sensuous memories. She invites me up onto the Packard deck, back into the life beside the sea. Her mother, Anne, weathered, warm, smiling, welcomes me instantly. Anne is a painter whose work my mother used to collect. Susan's older sister, Cynthia, a painter as well, introduces me to her husband, and their older child, a small, naked boy about the age I was when my brother and I made a fort in the pilings under this house in the summer of '62. Also: the same age and color as my mother in the many sepia-toned pictures showing little nude Diana sitting on the pilings below this deck in the summers of '32 and '33.

We sit on the raw-wood deck, and it's a little awkward at first because my enthusiasm is drawn and sustained by things the Packards hardly notice. I exclaim over the Big Rock at the end of the jetty, and they look at this landmark, whose fallen state they now take wholly for granted, and Susan says, "Oh, yeah, that must have happened gradually." From Anne I learn that the two men to whom Choate, Hall and Stewart sold our house in 1982 were an S&M couple who kept the shades at 619 drawn all day, emerging only at night to display the hardware of domination: heavy leather, whips, and, once, even a leash and studded collar. The newest owners of 619, according to Anne, are friendly, neighborly people, the Leavitts—hence LEVITATION.

It's hard not to let my eye stray over to the house. Unwillingly, I suspend disbelief, allow myself to look. I'm fascinated by the changes. The outdoor shower, moved from the front to the side of the house; the voluminous new bay windows; the new kitchen. Mainly, I can't get over the studio: originally Maurice Sterne's paint-daubed studio, later my brother's and my bedroom, which my grandfather, in coat and tie, used as his daytime study, and in which I later wrote my first two books. When I finally allow myself a good look at the boxy studio, cantilevered out over the deck, I'm aghast to find it exactly the same. Even the window frames appear untouched. Through the large asymmetrical bay window on the side, I can see into my room. My God, there is the wall above my bed, the matchboard wall, the tongue-and-groove boards. It's like coming out of surgery and seeing your own skin. No matter what they've done to it, you must now live with it. For the first time, this indispens-

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able thing, this vital substance, which is you, is no longer in your custody.

The more I look, the more accustomed I get to this unaccustomed state of being outside, looking in. The trick, of course, is to be willing to see things as they are—to recognize this house for what it is—not to picture it as I would have it be. At any moment I could take a breath and feel my way back inside the old dead skin. I could be in there, looking out. I could be sleeping in that room tonight, breathing in the sea and the salt on the damp night air. I could hear high water lapping on the sand. I could get up to take a leak and see the moon path on the incoming tide. I can tell you everything about night in that room.

While I am sitting with the Packards, Mrs. Leavitt of 619 Commercial walks from her beach, climbs the stairs to her deck, and steps into a basin of water, removing the sand from her feet before entering the house. Mrs. Leavitt does not resemble my mother, yet she looks so much like Diana doing this—this small orthodox ablution, so characteristic of summer and of the religion my mother and her parents made of summers in that house—that it sets me spiraling again. Even the basin of water is set on the holy altar at the head of the stairs.

I watch Mrs. Leavitt walk into the house in her bathing suit, and I think, How did I lose Diana Tead Michaelis? I mean, really, how? At the end of life there is the mystery of death. This keeps the undertakers in business and the survivors occupied for a couple of months or a couple of years or even a lifetime. Professional mourner is not a bad job when you consider some of the alternatives. But then comes a day, like this one, when you ask the question: Why isn't she here? And the answer, for a change, is not just: death. For once you don't just settle for the mystery of it, or the appalling pain of it, or even the fact of it, expressed in the sad and simple statement, "She died." On a day like this it feels as though some other force must be at work—not cancer, not stupidity, not evil—some other power, but my vision is not yet developed enough to see it. How else, on this eye-watering day in high summer, can I account for my dead mother, the lost house by the sea, the lost summers? How can I account for my grief, which ten years later is the only thing in my life that could be called permanent? You hear widows and widowers say: I thought about him/her every day for the rest of my life. But wait a minute: I'm a son, not a widower.

I leave my things at the Packards' and walk out onto the flats, looped on light. I walk out to where the tide has disappeared into green-black grasses and sandy pools with washboard bottoms. The farther out I go, the more I feel that I am approaching the center of things. Under my feet, the small cradling world of the tide pools. Above my head, a wide world, a sphere of light, that seems to give back knowledge of ourselves. My eye fixes on a lone sail, suspended out near the horizon. The sail hardly seems to move. It seems trimmed to the great serenity outside of things, skirting space and time, these dimensions I am stuck in to the end of my life. This has haunted me for ten years, this spot in the center of things, this loss of center. Now that I am here, I am not so much restored to sight as given new eyes. My childhood was presided over by ailing, alcoholic grandparents, obsolete careerists who, before it slipped from their grasp, opened for my brother and me their useful world, their trustworthy heaven. Ordway and Clara's Emersonian message, bequeathed to us through Mom, was: "The world is yours. . . . Every spirit builds itself a house; and beyond its house a world; and beyond its world a heaven. Know then, that the world exists for you. For you is the phenomenon perfect. What we are, that only can we see. All that Adam had, all that Caesar could, you have and can do."

The world was mine. Now I stand in the shallow pools, under the deep sky. I lie down in the water. Immediately I cry, I howl, I rage. I think I see. It's no good asking God why this was taken away from us, this paradise. Or scheming to get it back. It's no good living in banishment, in the small exilic world of bitterness and resentment and self-hatred. This is the unhealable place. No house, no home, no Boston law firm can repair this one. This is the place of no flesh, of white dust dissolving in the green water. This is the place where I at last go free.

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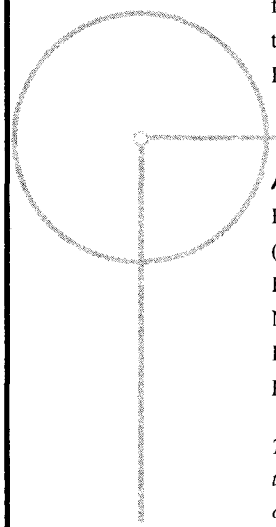

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• BOOKS •

REREADING

The Wodehouse Jacquerie

ROBERT McCRUM

The works of P. G. Wodehouse are, I've found, a pretty reliable guide to character. If you are part of the benighted ghetto that is not amused by Bertie Wooster's account of Gussie Fink-Nottle giving away the prizes to the boys of Market Snodsbury Grammar School, or possibly *The Clicking of Cuthbert*, or even the "Great Sermon Handicap," then we are not likely to see eye to eye. Speaking as a member of that joyous jacquerie of Wodehouse enthusiasts, I'm inclined to suggest that his work is pure litmus paper. Scorn it, and you're damned. Like it, and you join the elect.

I confess that I have been a Wodehouse reader and fan since the age of nine, when, like so many English boys of a certain class and generation, I was sent away to boarding school. The darkness of my separation from the family hearth was lightened by the discovery that an otherwise threadbare school library contained row upon row of the Herbert Jenkins editions of P. G. Wodehouse in his prime, roughly the years 1917 (the date of Jeeves's first appearance) to 1941, the approximate date of Wodehouse's self-imposed exile from Great Britain. Just to recall some of those titles is to conjure memories of countless happy hours lost in the branches of trees or at the back of cricket pavilions: *Love Among the Chickens, Joy in the Morning, The Mating Season, Summer Lightning, The Indiscretions of Archie, The Heart of a Goof.*

I left that school thirty years ago, thank God, but my juvenile studies of the Wodehouse canon had left their mark. Hunting down early editions of Wodehouse in secondhand bookshops has remained my secret vice. In England, those distinctive orange Herbert Jenkins spines smile from any bookcase as a more or less cast-iron guarantee of delight. Like many of you, I'm sure, I turn to one of these—*The Inimitable Jeeves*, perhaps, or *Uncle Fred in the Springtime*—when things seem black. Who could read a sentence like "Ice formed on the butler's upper slopes" and not feel a little cheerier about the world?

About five years ago, when I was struck down by a sudden and unexpectedly vicious assault on my cerebral cortex and semi-paralyzed for a number of weeks, it was *Week-End Wodehouse*, an out-of-print compilation, that saw me through. In extremis, I found that the prescriptions of Dr. Wodehouse (D. Litt. of Oxford University)—for example, "I once got engaged to his daughter Honoria, a ghastly dynamic exhibit who read Nietzsche and had a laugh like waves breaking on a stern and rock-bound coast"—were far more therapeutic than any amount of aspirin and Prozac from the good doctors of our National Health Service.

The one Wodehouse classic I daresay you'll never find in even the very best secondhand bookshop (at least not for a price less than the GDP of many Central African dictatorships) is *The Code of the Woosters*. To Wodehouse aficionados this book is vintage stuff, pure nectar, combining most of our favorite characters and a plot of such dizzying lunacy that, as the American humorist Joe Keenan observes, it makes "Feydeau's *A Flea in Her Ear* look like one of

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Samuel Beckett's less action-packed outings."

I first read *The Code of the Woosters* as a schoolboy in the 1960s. I had already been introduced to the Wodehouse oeuvre by my father and had, like him, found what Evelyn Waugh once called, in a famous broadcast, PGW's "idyllic world" perfectly to my taste. Together, we had laughed like drains over *Uncle Fred in the Springtime* and the timeless scrapes from which Jeeves, the omniscient butler, rescued his silly-ass employer, Bertie Wooster, in *Right Ho! Jeeves*. Like almost all those new to Wodehouse, I soon wanted more than the stories he'd first written for the *Saturday Evening Post* and published in collections like *Carry on, Jeeves*. I wanted meat and potatoes. I wanted a Bertie Wooster novel. If pressed, I'd have said I wanted a Bertie Wooster novel that took off from the point in *Right Ho! Jeeves* where Gussie Fink-Nottle's engagement to Madeline Bassett was broken off, or "severed," as Jeeves puts it, after her fiancé disgraced himself before the massed ranks of Market Snodsburians past and present at the annual school prize-giving.

The Code of the Woosters is the sublime answer to this humble prayer, and I can visualize pretty much exactly the twelve-year-old self that settled down to the story of Bertie Wooster's entanglement with Aunt Dahlia, Sir Watkyn Bassett, Roderick Spode, and that famously elusive silver cow creamer. *The Code of the Woosters* was written in 1937, on the brink of world catastrophe, and on rereading it now I find it both eerily of its time and also supremely a demonstration of what Wodehouse himself called "making a sort of musical comedy without music and ignoring real life altogether."

It begins, like *Hamlet*, in medias res, and at top speed:

> I reached out a hand from under the blankets, and rang the bell for Jeeves.
>
> "Good evening, Jeeves."
>
> "Good morning, sir."
>
> This surprised me.
>
> "Is it morning?"
>
> "Yes, sir."
>
> "Are you sure? It seems very dark outside."
>
> "There is a fog, sir. If you will recollect, we are now in Autumn—season of mists and mellow fruitfulness."
>
> "Season of what?"
>
> "Mists, sir, and mellow fruitfulness."
>
> "Oh? Yes. Yes, I see. Well, be that as it may, get me one of those bracers of yours, will you?"
>
> "I have one in readiness, sir, in the ice-box."

And off we go. A close re-examination of the text reveals that the action is largely concentrated into one long, hectic day and subsequent night. Even the preamble, some twenty pages in my nice, new Penguin edition, is crowded with incident and character, chiefly the introduction of Sir Watkyn Bassett CBE ("Slice him where you like, a hellhound is always a hellhound"), Roderick Spode, and the aforementioned cow creamer.

In one of his prefaces, Wodehouse alludes to his youthful friendship with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, a bond formed, he tells us, through a shared love of amateur cricket. He refers to this by way of introducing his admiration for Conan Doyle's detective stories, and it is not fanciful, I think, to see in the plot of the *Code of the Woosters* a comic tribute to Conan Doyle's devilish storytelling. Wodehouse implies this when he writes on page 4 that "in two shakes of a duck's tail" Bertie Wooster is to become involved in "an imbroglio that would test the Wooster soul as it had seldom been tested before . . . the sinister affair of Gussie Fink-Nottle, Madeline Bassett, old Pop Bassett, Stiffy Byng, the Rev. H. P. (Stinker) Pinker, the eighteenth-century cow creamer, and the small, brown, leather-covered notebook." Wodehouse is justly proud of this one, and he tells the reader as much at the outset:

> "Man and boy, Jeeves," I said, breaking a thoughtful silence. . . . "I have been in some tough spots in my time, but this one wins the mottled oyster."

As the novel unfolds, Wodehouse seems to revel in winding the plot up to a higher and higher pitch of complexity. "Jeeves," says Bertie, "stand by to counsel and advise. The plot has thickened." At this point, we are not even a third of the way through, and there is so much to come that the reader cannot imagine how Wodehouse is going to get himself out of the narrative straitjacket into which he has so cheerfully crammed himself. In the remaining nine chapters, Wodehouse not only

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will have Harold "Stinker" Pinker steal Constable Eustace Oates's helmet and Aunt Dahlia threaten to trade her chef for Sir Watkyn Bassett's cow creamer, but also will have Bertie briefly propose marriage to Madeline Bassett (for ulterior purposes), Gussie Fink-Nottle break off his engagement to La Bassett yet again, and Jeeves expose Roderick Spode's terrible secret ("Eulalie") through the mysterious agency of the Junior Ganymede Club. All, however, will end well, with Jeeves triumphantly enabled to take his master on the round-the-world cruise on which he has set his heart, and which Bertie, in best Wooster fashion, foolishly vetoed at the outset ("when two men of iron will live in close association with one another, there are bound to be occasional clashes").

But to dwell on the beautifully constructed plot is to concentrate on the well-oiled machinery of a superb fictional timepiece to the exclusion of its supreme literary artistry. Again, like *Hamlet* within the collected works of William Shakespeare, *The Code of the Woosters* seems to contain an extraordinary number of its author's most celebrated felicities:

> It is no use telling me that there are bad aunts and good aunts. At the core, they are all alike. Sooner or later, out pops the cloven hoof.

Or,

> She was definitely the sort of girl who puts her hand over a husband's eyes, as he is crawling in to breakfast with a morning head, and says: "Guess who !"

Or,

> "You see before you, Jeeves, a toad beneath the harrow."

Or,

> "Oh, ah, yes, of course, definitely." I remembered something Jeeves had once called Gussie. "A sensitive plant, what?"
>
> "Exactly. You know your Shelley, Bertie."
>
> "Oh, am I?"

I rest my case.

I have already noted that the novel was written in the mid-thirties. Reacquaintance reveals quite a wealth of topical, nay political, reference. Roderick Spode is plainly based on Sir Oswald Mosley, the self-styled leader of the Blackshirts, a British fascist party based in London's East End. As Bertie Wooster explains:

> [Spode is] "the founder and head of the Saviours of Britain, a Fascist organisation better known as the Black Shorts. His general idea, if he doesn't get knocked on the head with a bottle in one of the frequent brawls in which he and his followers indulge, is to make himself a Dictator."

Later on, when he was interned in Nazi Germany, Wodehouse got into very serious trouble with the British for using enemy broadcasting facilities to describe his POW experiences for American radio audiences. In light of this, the naïve innocence of his caricature of Roderick Spode is telling. And yet, though politics is very far from being his forte, elsewhere in the text we find reference to Mussolini, to "a Dictator on the point of starting a purge," and to "Red propaganda."

If politics was one area in which the Wodehouse antennae were notoriously ill attuned, in relations with the opposite sex they were hardly ever unfurled. Girls in Wodehouse are essentially characters from musical theater. Always decorative, often fatal, they are there to complicate the life of the Wodehouse male, whose job, in turn, is to avoid being lured into the snares of matrimony. To the best of my recollection, Bertie Wooster has at different times found himself entangled with Roberta Wickham, Stephanie Byng, Gwladys Pendlebury, Cynthia Wickhammersley, Xenobia Hopwood, and Florence Craye, to say nothing of the fearsome Madeline Bassett. It is the measure of Wodehouse's authorial satisfaction with Bertie that he is never married off to any of these ladies in the way that, for example, happens to Psmith at the end of *Leave it to Psmith.*

All this is with the wisdom of hindsight. *The Code of the Woosters* does, nonetheless, boast Bertie's romantic nemesis, Madeline Bassett—a woman who believes that "the stars were God's daisy chain"—in full cry. Near the beginning of the novel, we find Bertie not mincing

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words: "I call her a ghastly girl because she was a ghastly girl." But that's about as far as he goes. When, a few hours later, Madeline compares Bertie to Seigneur Geoffrey Rudel, Prince of Blay-en-Saintonge, who "fell in love with the wife of the Lord of Tripoli," Bertie stirs uneasily. "I hoped," he says, "she was going to keep it clean."

As an Edwardian clubman with a flat in Mayfair, Bertie has a stilted emotional vocabulary. Although at one point he refers to "red-hot sparks of pash," we can be fairly certain that he won't elaborate. He is no prude, but he has an innate, if slightly defective, moral compass. When Stiffy Byng names her terms for handing over Gussie Fink-Nottle's sensational leather-bound notebook, which contains a scandalous and coruscating portrait of Roderick Spode's asparagus-eating demeanor, Bertie says:

> I read her purpose, and shuddered.
>
> She was naming the Price of the Papers. In other words, after being blackmailed by an aunt at breakfast, I was now being blackmailed by a female crony before dinner. Pretty good going, even for this lax post-war world.

A few pages later, we find Bertie complaining pretty freely to Jeeves:

> "The whole fact of the matter is that all this modern emancipation of women has resulted in them getting it up their noses and not giving a damn what they do. It was not like this in Queen Victoria's day. The Prince Consort would have had a word to say about a girl like Stiffy, what?"

That passage reminds us that, by 1937, Wodehouse, born a late-Victorian in 1881, was approaching his sixtieth birthday. *The Code of the Woosters* is certainly of its decade, but it also bears the unmistakable traces of Wodehouse's early years, his public school education at Dulwich, and his youthful experience on the "By the Way" column of *The Globe*. When Bertie exclaims "Upon my Sam" and says of Spode, "Look at that frightful ass Spode swanking about in footer bags! Did you ever in your puff see such a perfect perisher?" he is using the late-Victorian slang of the bank clerks and the Pooters, those upwardly mobile, lower-middle-class denizens of the south London suburbs.

In addition to admiring Conan Doyle, the young Wodehouse grew up in a literary environment dominated, at the comic end, by the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan and the gentle humor of Jerome K. Jerome, author of the 1889 novel *Three Men in a Boat*. There are moments in *The Code of the Woosters* that betray Jerome's influence—for instance, Bertie's sardonic recollection of Mrs. Bingo Little's characterization of her husband's "poetic" nature:

> The old egg never noticed a sunset in his life and that, if he did by a fluke ever happen to do so, the only thing he would say about it would be that it reminded him of a slice of roast beef, cooked just right.

And the Code of the Woosters? It is, finally, a trifle lame, but I give it to you anyway:

> "Didn't you tell me once that the Code of the Woosters was 'Never let a pal down'?"
>
> She had found a talking point. People who appeal to the Code of the Woosters rarely fail to touch a chord in Bertram.

At this point, I must confess an ulterior motive to this essay. For some months now I have been in negotiation with Sir Edward Cazalet and the Trustees of the Wodehouse Estate about a fully authorized life of P. G. Wodehouse, a book that, incredibly enough, for various complicated reasons, has never yet been published. At the moment of writing, I'm delighted to report that I have just received the green light from Sir Edward. This rereading of *The Code of the Woosters*, then, is the curtain-raiser to a sustained period of research into the long and largely happy life of a great comic genius, English literature's "performing flea." If anyone with Wodehouse information to impart should chance to read these lines, I hope he or she will get in touch. 12 Eldon Road, London W8 5PU are reliable coordinates. And now—if you'll excuse me—I've got about ninety more Wodehouse books to reread.

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Crimes of Language

DAVID CARROLL

THE COLLABORATOR:
THE TRIAL AND EXECUTION OF ROBERT BRASILLACH
By Alice Kaplan. Chicago. $25.

As part of the general process of *épuration* undertaken by the French government after the liberation of Paris, a number of collaborationist writers, critics, and political journalists were arrested, tried, and sentenced to death, primarily for the words they wrote. Few of the death sentences of those convicted for what could be called crimes of language were actually implemented. One case, however, stands out among the others and continues to retain the interest not just of historians and literary critics but of the general public as well: that of the anti-Semitic, pro-Nazi critic, writer, and polemicist Robert Brasillach.

In hindsight, it appears that Brasillach was executed, at the age of thirty-five, as much as an example of intellectual collaboration as for the specific crimes he committed. This conclusion in no way mitigates the nefariousness of the articles that Brasillach wrote either for the extremist journal *Je suis partout*, during the years he was its editor, or for numerous other extremist, pro-Nazi, anti-Semitic journals. Other writers and intellectuals went even further than Brasillach in their support of Nazi Germany, and were more vicious in their attacks on Jews, Gaullists, and *résistants*. But among "legitimate" writers and critics, only Brasillach was put to death for the crime of "intelligence with the enemy"—that is, for abusing his literary talent and aiding and abetting France's Nazi enemy by the words he wrote. His execution was undoubtedly meant to show that the words he had written in support of Vichy France and Nazi Germany indeed mattered to the various factions of the Resistance. But only Brasillach, among all of the French collaborationist intellectuals and writers, paid the highest price.

In the most important trials of Vichy French political leaders, the head men—Pétain and Laval—were both condemned to die, but the former's sentence was commuted by de Gaulle; the latter was immediately executed. Closer to Brasillach's case, Lucien Rebatet and other militant staff members of *Je suis partout* (mockingly labeled *Je suis parti* [I have left] after its principal contributors fled France with the departing German troops) were also condemned to die when they were tried in the fall of 1946. They were never executed, however, and were released from prison in the early 1950s.

During his trial, Brasillach refused to compromise his "principles," deny his allegiances, mitigate his beliefs, apologize for his excesses, or take back any of the words he wrote—and that certainly made it easier to convict and execute him. At the same time, his commitment to the fascist cause, even in the face of death, also helped raise Brasillach above the other collaborators and make him in death what he was not in life, and what none of the other intellectual collaborators ever became: a martyr for the cause of the extreme right. Had he lived, it seems safe to say, he would have remained just one intellectual collaborator among many—more talented than most, but not the genius some have claimed.

Who exactly was Brasillach, this symbol of treachery and hatred, and what were his intellectual and political roots? In a celebrated essay published in August 1945, Jean-Paul Sartre claimed that Brasillach and collaborators like him represented "foreign elements" among the French. In fact the opposite is true. Brasillach was rather profoundly French, and like Sartre

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himself, he had been a student at one of the best lycées in Paris and then at the prestigious École Normale Supérieure. So it was in the most esteemed institutions of the French republican educational system that Brasillach perfected his impressive rhetorical skills, acquired a deep love of classical literature, and developed his hateful anti-Semitism and his violently anti-Republican politics.

None of this destined him for the firing squad, however. One of Brasillach's closest friends at both the Lycée Louis-le-Grand and the École Normale, Thierry Maulnier, began writing for Charles Maurras's royalist, anti-Semitic newspaper, *Action Française,* at the same time as Brasillach, and he also contributed to other extremist journals until France's defeat in World War II. After the war, Maulnier had a successful literary and journalistic career and was elected to the Académie Française. This was the kind of career Brasillach might also have expected for himself had he been willing to moderate his political views at the moment of the defeat. Instead, he chose even more overt, enthusiastic collaboration with Nazi Germany in the name of an idealized fascist cause. In one of the last essays he wrote while in prison, he still referred to fascism as "*the* poetry of the twentieth century."

Brasillach's defense of fascism and his admiration of Nazi Germany were rooted in an aesthetic appreciation of politics and were often expressed in naïve and impressionistic terms. But that did not make Brasillach a less extreme ideologue or a less vindictive denunciator of all enemies of "true France"—and, from 1940 on, those of Nazi Germany as well. In 1938 and 1939, while he was its editor, *Je suis partout* published two special issues on the "Jewish Question." In Brasillach's own essays for the two issues, he advocated a special statute for French Jews and the implementation of a rigorous set of restrictions and exclusions based on what he called, following Charles Maurras, an "anti-Semitism of reason." Among the first pieces of legislation produced by the Vichy state in October 1940 was a Jewish Statute that was very close to the "rational solution" Brasillach had proposed before the war.

Brasillach went even further on June 2, 1941, when, under the protection of the occupying German army and in the name of "reason" and "true French nationalism"—and after denying that he or other contributors to the now overtly pro-Nazi journal were "barbarians and butchers"—he wrote that "it is necessary to resolve the Jewish problem because the Jew is the foreigner, he is the enemy, he pushed us into war, and it is just that he pay." When the archbishop of Toulouse protested the deportation of stateless Jews (especially children) from France, Brasillach in September 1942 blamed all of the brutalities that occurred in their arrest and deportation not on the German or French authorities, but on "police AGITATORS who want the poor Aryan idiots to feel sorry." He then argued that the children should not be separated from their parents, because "it is necessary to free ourselves of the Jews in block and not keep the little ones. Here humanity is in agreement with wisdom."

In "No Pity for the Assassins of the Country," an article written in October 1941, Brasillach called for the elimination of all enemies of the Vichy state and Nazi Germany. "What are we waiting for to shoot the communist leaders already imprisoned? And these important bourgeois who at night, discreetly cut up metro tickets in the form of Gaullist insignia? . . . Against those who want the death of peace and the death of France, EVERYTHING is legitimate. . . . No pity for those who want to assassinate the country, whatever they are or whoever they are." This has always seemed to me the most damning of the articles Brasillach wrote, the one most likely to have made it impossible for de Gaulle to commute his death sentence, even if he had been inclined to do so. In any case, no pity or clemency was forthcoming for this enemy of Jews, the French Republic, and the Resistance.

If Brasillach was chosen to be the example of intellectual collaboration and suffer the consequences, it was first of all because he had worked very hard to earn that honor. His fame and success as an avid anti-Semite, fascist polemicist, and Nazi supporter; his much-publicized trips to Germany in the company of a small number of French writers; and his extremely public social contacts with important German intellectual and political leaders made him one of the most visible intellectual collaborators. And he was clearly proud of his notori-

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ety, his stature, and most of all of his own vitriolic rhetoric.

But chance also played a part. Because Brasillach did not flee France as his fellow extremist writers had, but surrendered in September 1944 (after he heard that his mother had been arrested and was being held in order to lure him out of hiding), he was tried in December before all the other important intellectual collaborators. This was at a time when the demand for revenge was the strongest (especially among other intellectuals and writers), the trials the shortest and most legally questionable, and the penalties the most severe and most quickly carried out. Lucien Rebatet, his colleague at *Je suis partout* and his master in outrageous anti-Semitic diatribe, admitted in an interview given in 1969 that he felt he and other ex-collaborators were not executed because Brasillach had "saved our lives by dying first."

By focusing on his trial and the events surrounding his execution, Alice Kaplan's *The Collaborator* helps explain how Robert Brasillach achieved his exemplary status among collaborators. Kaplan's study owes much to Michel Laval's excellent *Brasillach ou la trahison du clerc* (1992), but she, even more than Laval, focuses on Brasillach as a dramatic persona in the political spectacle of his trial for treason. Kaplan's lively and very readable presentation of Brasillach's trial intensifies the drama already inherent in the events. Though the book contains little new material and no surprising revelations, I doubt that the trial itself has ever been presented in such a gripping manner.

Kaplan gives an informative summary of many of the ideological conflicts that Brasillach's trial summarized and restaged, but the interest of her book lies in the engaging narratives she constructs of the lives and careers of key personalities in the trial. This is true not just for Brasillach, the protagonist, but also for Marcel Reboul, the government prosecutor, and Jacques Isorni, Brasillach's defense attorney, who also defended Pétain, both of whom are treated as major figures in the unfolding drama. By insisting on the many personal ties between the prosecution and the defense, Kaplan effectively highlights how this trial was "une affaire de famille," a crucial symbolic moment in the long "Franco-French" conflict over French national identity and political culture.

Reboul and Isorni were from very different social backgrounds, but both were political conservatives who continued to practice law under Vichy and pledged loyalty to Pétain. One of the many ironies of the trial is that they, too, could have been considered to have collaborated, although certainly more discreetly and in a much more limited, "professional" way than Brasillach. *The Collaborator* underscores the further irony that Isorni and Reboul were friends and that Isorni was also Reboul's landlord and rented him an apartment across the hall from his own. Kaplan reveals that much of the strategy of the trial—whether either side should call witnesses, for example—was discussed and decided between the two friends outside of court. Through its narrative of the intertwined lives of the two opposing lawyers, *The Collaborator* highlights aspects of the backstage, daily dramas of a divided France during and immediately after the Occupation.

Brasillach's trial is such good melodrama that at times Kaplan cannot resist abandoning the position of an offstage observer and commentator, and enters directly into the drama she is narrating. For example, because there is little trace of what she calls "the real drama" in Reboul's administrative dossier, she relies heavily and uncritically on his daughter's memory and on the stories he told his family about his alleged passive resistance to German orders during the Occupation. Kaplan acknowledges that "a family story doesn't have the veracity of a document in the archives," but because she is interested in dramatic effect as well as historical veracity, she defends her presentation of Reboul's story: "It has a meaning, even if it's a wishful one."

Kaplan then goes further and relates her own feelings and wishes for Reboul, who appears to be her favorite character in the drama of Brasillach's trial: "I like to imagine that Marcel Reboul was more decent than the structure allowed, that he was principled in an unprincipled time. . . . It is easy to imagine the way he told the story of the SS men to his daughter, the way he shaped it, with his booming voice, his rhetorical skills." Based on a detailed knowledge of historical facts, *The Collaborator* at such moments nonetheless has the appearance of historical

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docudrama, with the author herself becoming a character in the unfolding action as she struggles to make its characters come to life and speak to us, through her, in the way she wants them to speak—or wishes they had spoken.

One should perhaps not be overly critical of this aspect of *The Collaborator*, since the trial itself was highly melodramatic, and many of the arguments of both the prosecutor and the defense were more emotional than analytical or were founded on strict legal arguments. Because the prosecutor's case was based almost exclusively on Brasillach's writings, it had more to do with Brasillach's metaphorical expressions of love for Germany than with the specific effects of his rhetorical crimes and the strictly juridical definition of treason. As Kaplan points out, Reboul concluded his closing remarks in the trial by evoking Brasillach's widely suspected homosexuality (to which Sartre's previously mentioned essay, published months after the trial, also referred), as if homosexuality were the ultimate proof of treason. Reboul read into the record Brasillach's most sentimental and nostalgic essays on collaborationist France's relations with Nazi Germany, "accusing Brasillach, in a symbolic register, of homosexual desire for Germany. The writer was, in print if not in deed, a 'horizontal collaborator' [the term used to describe French women who slept with Germans] . . . Reboul was playing on the sexual metaphor in Brasillach's writing to argue that Brasillach's love for Germany was tantamount to an infidelity to France—and worse, a perverse infidelity. Brasillach was perverse, unproductive, un-French." At such moments, the political melodrama had become, in effect, a sensationalist, homophobic soap opera.

Kaplan sheds no new light—and undoubtedly there is no new light to shed—on the problem of why de Gaulle did not respond positively to a petition signed by a number of important writers and intellectuals, including Albert Camus (who was no admirer of Brasillach but was against capital punishment) and François Mauriac (who was also the father of one of de Gaulle's personal secretaries). Though de Gaulle refused to commute Brasillach's sentence, he never explained why he would not do what was later done in many cases involving intellectual collaborators. The drama of Brasil-

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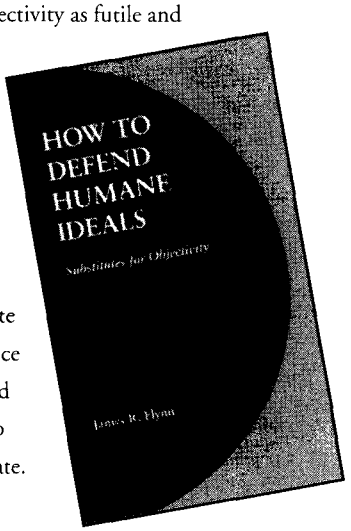

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lach's trial and execution will thus remain without a closing act until conclusive evidence is found to explain de Gaulle's refusal.

What *The Collaborator* does best, and does vividly, is to present Brasillach's trial as good drama. Kaplan concludes that this callous, hateful, and treasonous ideologue should not have been executed, despite his excesses, for crimes that, no matter how rhetorically violent, were linguistic and not physical acts. *The Collaborator* repeatedly attacks Brasillach's mythical status as a martyr to the cause of the extreme right. But its dramatic presentation of his life and trial, powerful as it might be, nonetheless risks indirectly reinforcing the very myth it abhors. By treating the trial predominantly as a political spectacle and Brasillach as its "hero," Kaplan inadvertently may have made the man more of a star than he actually was. What may be more historically and politically significant in Brasillach's case is not his dramatic persona, but the fact that the strain of fascism and anti-Semitism he championed was profoundly French, with deep roots in indigenous political and aesthetic traditions.

What needs to be analyzed further, therefore, is not the way France's extreme, anti-Republican right still uses images of heroes and martyrs like Brasillach, but the extent to which it continues to draw on, and perpetuate, entrenched traditions of bigotry and intolerance.

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A Crowning Work

SHAKESPEARE'S LANGUAGE
By Frank Kermode. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $30.

Reviewed by RICHARD HOWARD

That irregular but persistent sequence of distinguished critical texts—Sir Frank Kermode's fifteen volumes of literary judgment, speculation, and response, in which Shakespeare is specifically discussed as early as 1961, and which includes a very suggestive 1965 anthology of Shakespeare criticism introduced by Kermode's important essay characterizing the entire range of such writing from the 1590s to the 1950s—is now crowned, it is not too much to say, by a distillation of poetic insight, his "concern for the most part with Shakespeare's dramatic verse," an intensely detailed study of the medium to which the maker's nature was subdued.

The honorific sense of coronation is mine, of course, but Kermode himself is quite secure about the suitability of Shakespeare's capital role in our playgoing and reading lives ("You can't get rid of Shakespeare without abolishing the very notion of literature. . . . A true acquaintance with Shakespeare is as necessary to our culture as an understanding, however partial, of the greatness of Mozart or Cézanne"). He disposes briskly of an obsolete idolatry as well as of a modish political repudiation—"whatever else this book may be, it is not idolatrous; it shuns that ancient error as coldly as it avoids its modern counterparts . . . [all] ways of taking Shakespeare down a peg"—and proceeds, with a secure sense of the justice of his cause, to a critical concern with the developing language of the plays. This means with the developing silence and the developing obscurity on either side of that language: "I believe in the value of Shakespeare and, without ignoring historical issues, regard the plays as being about more than such issues."

Kermode's strategies are eclectic. Though he

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implies that his versions of linguistic attention have not been previously pursued through the canon with any consecution, he nonetheless makes use, offhandedly but most astutely, of a great deal of the scholarship, drawing particularly on recent textual studies, which have accumulated so dauntingly since the completion of the *O.E.D.* By such preemption, his criticism—sensitive but never jittery, sharp but never barbed—reminds me in its tonality of many essays of T. S. Eliot, who profited so notably from the often minute drudgery of his academic contemporaries in his own terse and vivid formulations of "original" critical insight. Of course, Professor Kermode, who has edited many texts, including the Arden *Tempest*, and is much more of a scholar than Eliot ever aspired to be, quite affably hands off to various concordances and the productions of the more mathematical specialists: "It may be worth adding that the word 'will,' which of course is not always a noun, occurs with much more than average frequency in this play [*Love's Labours Lost*]." He generally credits his scholarly sources, though he is not above ribbing the experts ("it has even been said") or employing Housman's notorious plus-one tactic:

> James Shapiro in *Shakespeare and the Jews* (1996) argues that circumcision is important in *The Merchant of Venice*—"the pound of flesh," until Shylock claims in the trial scene that he wants to have it from near Antonio's heart, would strongly connote the genitalia, 'flesh being a biblical euphemism for penis.'

"This," Kermode dryly concludes, "is another important distinction Shylock fails to mention." And in fact there is, along with the requisite relevance of citations from Dr. Johnson or Coleridge or William Empson, a certain amount of "revealing" computation:

> "Time" occurs 44 times in *Macbeth*, the relative frequency being .267 percent. The comparable figure for *Hamlet* (48 occurrences) is .162 percent, for *King Lear* (27 occurrences) .107 percent, for *Antony and Cleopatra* (33 occurrences) .139 percent, for *Coriolanus* (32 occurrences) .120 percent.

Granted, this sort of thing is stowed away in a footnote—indeed, every effort has been made to avoid the longueurs of specialized apparatus: "Now and again," Kermode writes, "I have had to use some technical language when writing about texts, so I have added an appendix explaining the terms." Furthermore, no bibliography or index is supplied; I infer that this remarkable book is, even more remarkably, intended for the common reader, the ordinary playgoer, creatures whom the author generously assumes to exist. Certainly many "difficulties" in the plays are conjured away by the urbanities of Kermode's felicitous prose rather than by strenuous critical contraption:

> Structurally, the plan is that all the plots should come together in a multiple recognition scene which is sometimes, and rightly, said to have a rather farcical effect, not perhaps altogether unintended.

"Not perhaps altogether unintended"—if only Professor Chiappe had murmured such a phrase in Shakespeare 101, how much more readily we incredulous undergraduate literalists would have cottoned to *Cymbeline*!

Of course, it is not Kermode's purpose to have anyone cotton even to *Cymbeline*. He is not selling the bard. And if he has "said something about all the plays"—a characteristically understated claim—it is with an express intention beyond the usual eulogy of what rhetoricians call Shakespeare's arts of language: there is, Kermode observes, a turning point in Shakespeare's language at about the time his company moves to the Globe Theatre (1599–1600); "already the author of several masterpieces, Shakespeare moved up to a new level of achievement and difficulty, and I associate [the turning point] with *Hamlet* and with the poem 'The Phoenix and Turtle.'"

Hence, after an initial sixty pages devoted to all the plays up to *Julius Caesar*—in which Kermode sees "devotion to, or dependence on, the arts of non-dramatic poetry, which produces effects in the early plays that would seem strange in *Hamlet* or its successors. . . . Something of the old eloquence remains, but qualified now by its reduction to place in a context altogether more complex and ambiguous"—Kermode deals with each of the subsequent plays in an individual essay, often of great intricacy and detailed quotation. These essays are

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the opposite of, say, Granville Barker's analyses of Shakespearean staging; rather, they treat the plays as if they were poems by Mallarmé, unique—and uniquely—structures of words. Nor is there much sense in preferring some of these essays to others as if, in the fashion of Harold Bloom, say, Kermode were "stronger" on *Lear* than on *The Tempest*, or as if, still in the Bloomian mode, he avowed a distaste for one of the romances. The kind of exploration performed, the understanding achieved, is all of a piece throughout, no more enlightening about *Troilus and Cressida* ("One cannot have fame or glory by one's own inward knowledge; it has to come from the mouths of others, not from within") than about *Coriolanus* ("The gradual toughening and gnarling of language, accompanied by a new freedom and variety of metaphor and a more rugged pentameter are well-recognized features of Shakespeare's later work. . . . Here we have this lexical and syntactic habit in its full maturity: stubborn repetition, free association, violent ellipses; in short, a prevailing ruggedness of tone"). Kermode's wisdom throughout this daedal, exacting study is an earlier wisdom than the kind we find in Dr. Johnson (or in Bloom, for that matter). It is a wisdom that I should recommend as a primary application, to be taken before all others. Kermode's book is a triumph of inauguration and the crowning action of his splendid career of criticism. It is, and will doubtless remain, the first book one should read about Shakespeare's plays, and *with* those plays, in order to understand them and whatever has been written concerning them since.

It is somewhat paradoxical that in a study of Shakespeare's dramatic verse, specifically separated from the examination of the effects of his nondramatic poetry on the earlier plays, Kermode should fix his "turning point" so firmly upon a poem, "The Phoenix and Turtle." Yet perhaps because the poem (thought to be contemporaneous with *Hamlet*) has no obvious parallel in the canon of Shakespeare's plays, "it may throw a more direct light on the operation of the poet's mind," as Kermode says. The exploration of the remoter possibilities of language was essential to Shakespeare's poetry, and in unpacking a particularly recondite later poem, Kermode illuminates the intention of the later dramatic works. Here Kermode's skill with the interpretation of poetry, ancient and modern, in so many earlier critical discussions serves him crucially, and what he draws from this poem will serve as an example of his rich extraction throughout:

> "The Phoenix and Turtle" offers a paradigm of Shakespeare's obsession with the idea of two-in-one, of relations between substance and shadow. The puzzle of the relation of one to two seems to have been a fundamental of Shakespeare's, and one can understand it as natural enough in a theatre poet: the theater and the world, the Globe and the globe, the actor as shadow. In its purest form it calls forth a metaphysical lyric; pathologized, it summons *Hamlet*.

Such insights nicely rehearse the splendid fruition of Kermode's lifelong concern with Shakespeare's language, its transformation into a diction so intricate as to take its poet, sometimes, into realms where the reader or spectator is at pains to follow him, "beyond the limits of reason and intelligibility"—limits pushed much further back by this grand book.

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Farming for Democracy

THE LAND WAS EVERYTHING: LETTERS FROM AN AMERICAN FARMER
By Victor Davis Hanson. Free Press. $24.

Reviewed by CHARLES FISH

As its subtitle suggests, Hanson's discourse on the decline of the family farm is cast in the form of letters that attempt to do for Americans of our time what Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer,* published in 1782, did for the American "new" man of the eighteenth century. Like his eminent predecessor, Hanson has known more than farming. "A farmer turned professor," he teaches classics at California State University, Fresno, and has written a number of books. His use of Crèvecoeur is more than a literary conceit, however. As he says, Crèvecoeur's real subject was the "relationship between the cultivated landscape of America and the nature of its citizenry." Hanson's real subject is similar, but whereas Crèvecoeur's happy task was to celebrate the American farmer as a "new" man—an independent, responsible, democratic citizen—Hanson's melancholy mission is to examine the new man's vanishing descendants and their replacement by glutted consumers and urban thugs.

Hanson's family farm—his children are the sixth generation to occupy the same house—lies in California's San Joaquin Valley, a region of extraordinary agricultural abundance but also great hazards. The challenges facing the farm and others like it are found in the ten "letters" of the text, which are grouped in three parts: "Man versus Nature," "Man versus Man," and "Man versus Self." To farm is to fight, and the battles are both ancient and modern. Nature, recalcitrant partner from the beginning, is both man's victim (suburban growth and pollution) and man's enemy (diseases, weeds, weather, and creatures large and small). But

Charles Fish is the author of *In Good Hands: The Keeping of a Family Farm.* He teaches English at Western New England College.

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Klaus Vondung
Translated from the German by Stephen D. Ricks
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combat with mites, hoppers, squirrels, and rabbits yields more than victory over the land. The lessons learned from tilling tough ground are social and philosophical ones. Since farming "will always be war," it is "the clearest mechanism known to teach the man of the *polis* the properly tragic view of the universe."

The most challenging enemy of the farmer is man himself, sometimes in surprising forms. Hanson divides the human enemies of farming into two groups, the good and the bad. The bad includes trespassers, vandals, thieves, and occasional psychopaths, but the good people are the most lethal. And the worst of them, the ultimate enemies, are not the developers and other moneymen, but the decent, ordinary Americans who insist on cheap, blemish-free (if not particularly tasty) food no matter how far it must be flown or trucked, and who therefore make inevitable the accelerating domination of corporate agriculture and the demise of the family farm.

More far-reaching and less obvious is the argument of the fifth letter, in which the topic of man versus man takes the form of country versus city. Drawing heavily on his beloved Greek and Latin writers, Hanson explores the age-old antithesis of urban and agrarian life but holds that ultimately they need each other, and not just to exchange food and money. The farm is the "mean between complete artificiality and nature absolute." It imposes order upon a chaotic nature, and nurtures independence, diligence, and a stern, practical morality, teaching what man needed to learn to establish the *polis,* or city-state, a limited democratic order in some ways much healthier than our own. But the farmer also needs the town, for "without such a community nearby he is nothing, a savage frontiersman, not a builder of families."

Hanson concludes his discussion of the struggle of man versus man with an unsparing debunking of the popular mythologies of farming. Life on the farm isn't serene or simple, farmers are not "nice," agribusiness does not threaten our food supply, and farming is not coterminus with human history. Human beings existed for eons in pre-agrarian societies, and thanks to industrial agriculture, they can survive in post-agrarian ones. But Hanson fears that no civilization to be proud of can exist without "rural communities, and families tied to particular parcels of land."

Lacking the focus of the rest of the book, Hanson's final series of letters, "Man versus Self," describes the "autolysis" of farming, the necessary scale of vineyard or orchard operations; a single error of judgment in applying chemicals, for example, can wipe out an entire crop. It sings at excessive length the praises of the small vineyard tractor, an instrument that would have allowed the Greeks and Romans to do without slaves. A letter called "The Language of Truth" speaks briefly of the agrarian practice of calling things by their right names, not by evasive alternatives. In a far-fetched argument, the blunt language of the farm is said to be "at the heart of the farmer's crisis," too far removed from the dominant linguistic evasions of the "utilitarian Right" and the "therapeutic Left." While apparently opposed, Right and Left share the desire "to create a uniform, classless society cemented together by a common satiation of the appetites."

By way of summary, Hanson offers a "Two-Minute Synopsis" of the decline of the family farm. Since farmers constitute only one percent of the population and most of them are in corporate agriculture, the agrarian habits of religion, tradition, community, and the sobering daily encounter with stubborn nature through physical labor have largely disappeared. In their place are the consumerist mentality of suburbia and the dangerous unhappiness of the urban underclass, neither of which is a secure foundation for a democratic polity.

It is clear that Hanson's ambition is to describe not only the farm, which he does superbly, but also the political society of which it is now just a tiny part. This in turn requires him to think about human nature itself. From Hanson's perspective, the picture is rather grim, for most human beings do not thrive morally in fat and easy times. Even the farmer hesitates to acknowledge the "unhappy insight that character more often comes from tragedy, virtue rarely from success." Economic abundance, if undisciplined by the restraints inherent in agrarianism, erodes character and community. Far from being a constant in human history, family farming was "a rather brief interlude in the ceaseless and fated progression from savagery to debauchery to boredom."

Hanson's understanding of human affairs is much closer to the cyclical theories of some of

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the ancients than to modern progressivism. High art and thought require an urban culture, but the Athens that gave us the Parthenon also sent the city's armada to its doom off Sicily (the vote of the "urban mob") and put independent cities to the sword in search of tribute. Ironically, it was the Athenian farmers who first created the customs and conditions that led to "the more democratic city-state capable of both artistic creation and ruthless destruction. There is no solution to this tragic, endless cycle of creation, enjoyment, and decline in the West."

In academia, his second home, Hanson sees no solution, for the academy has much to teach us, but not the wisdom we most need: how to live. "The soul's slow acquisition of rectitude before the grave can be had far better from the wear on the body and the wisdom of heartbreak," or as Hanson says, quoting Aeschylus, *pathei mathos,* "knowledge through pain."

There is much one would like to explore with the author of this provocative book. Can the American small farmer of tradition really be understood so completely in terms of his material existence? How deep is his kinship with the ancient Greek farmers? Is his world comprehensible without recourse to the philosophic founders of the modern liberal state? What might the moral code of the farmer owe to religious teachings? (Crèvecoeur, it is true, saw religious differences fade in secular America.) Is there no hope for responsible democratic citizenship without the restraints of agrarianism? For Plato, Xenophon, and Aristotle, wasn't the life of the citizen-farmer (or nonfarmer, for that matter) judged in the light of a powerful alternative, if an alternative for only the few, that of the philosophic life? Would Hanson himself be satisfied with the confinements of agrarian life, for all its rectitude and good sense? Reading his book, doesn't one see that he was born for inquiry and discourse that might take the farm for its subject but would range far beyond it? In her astute foreword, Jane Smiley says that Victor Hanson "is not afraid to start a fight." If he succeeds, perhaps the silent struggles of a dwindling class of farmers might be taken up by those trained to fight wars of words, and the result might be the most productive kind of engagement: a battle for solutions.

Publisher-King

THE CHIEF:
THE LIFE OF WILLIAM RANDOLPH HEARST
By David Nasaw. Houghton Mifflin. $40.

Reviewed by HERBERT MITGANG

A major event in the annals of American publishing occurred in mid-March; it will necessitate some updating in histories and biographies, including later editions of this excellent new life of William Randolph Hearst. His heirs sold his flagship newspaper, the *San Francisco Examiner,* to a Chinese-American independent publisher, Ted Fang. There is a sweet irony about the sale, because in earlier days the *Examiner* used to revile the Asian-American community and other "foreigners."

The traditional big-city American press is in turmoil. Some papers are up for grabs; several have already changed hands. The *Boston Globe* was acquired by the *New York Times.* More surprisingly, the *Los Angeles Times* has been sold to the *Chicago Tribune.* What remains to be seen is how much individualism and regionalism will be lost. Can editorial independence be maintained, especially during presidential election years?

These dramatic changes of ownership make a reader with a sense of history almost yearn for such pioneering publishers as William Randolph Hearst, with all his foibles. In *The Chief,* a readable and scholarly work by David Nasaw, chairman of the doctoral program in history at City University of New York Graduate Center, many new facets of Hearst's story are revealed. To be sure, the publisher was no Adolph Ochs of the *New York Times* or Joseph Pulitzer of the *New York World*—Hearst's rivals in New York City journalism early in the twentieth century. The author makes clear why Hearst's name will

Herbert Mitgang, a former editorial writer and book critic for the *New York Times,* is the author of two books published this year—*Abraham Lincoln: A Press Portrait* and *Once Upon a Time in New York: Jimmy Walker, Franklin Roosevelt, and the Last Great Battle of the Jazz Age.*

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always be linked to the phrase "yellow journalism." A more educated and sophisticated reading public saw through the screaming headlines and doctored photographs in the Hearst broadsheets and tabloids, and to this day the once-powerful Hearst newspaper chain carries no influence in the country. The Hearst magazines—among them *Cosmopolitan, Good Housekeeping,* and *Harper's Bazaar*—remain influential and successful. David Nasaw points out that at the height of his power Hearst controlled the largest publishing empire in the United States: it included twenty-five daily newspapers, a major feature syndicate, a wire service, and interests in movie companies.

But newspapers gave Hearst his notoriety. To his editors he was known as "the chief," and for good reason. They were told how to play stories, and they had to be keenly aware of his favorites, enemies, friends, and prejudices. Hearst did not rely solely on his staff; he also wrote columns and editorials himself.

Hearst was very much a hands-on publisher. He recognized talent and was willing to pay his top editors and columnists well. And he was not above raiding the staffs of his rival publishers. Political influence was always in the forefront of his decision making. "In politics and journalism, as Hearst knew only too well, access was power," writes Nasaw. "By the early 1930s, he had secured access not only to the President of the United States [Franklin D. Roosevelt] but to the principal leaders of Europe, whom he paid handsomely—in dollars—to serve as foreign correspondents for his March of Events Sunday section."

As is well known, Hearst is usually blamed for instigating the Spanish-American War by urging his staff to play up atrocities—even to invent them. You could look it up. He is remembered in *Bartlett's* for only one quote. Hearst supposedly told Frederic Remington: "You furnish the pictures and I'll furnish the war." Did he actually say that? Justin Kaplan, the *Bartlett's* editor, qualifies by saying "attributed instructions to artist Frederic Remington in Havana, Cuba."

Here is how Nasaw handles the alleged instructions to Remington:

> Though many pages have been written about these telegrams, there is no record of them. . . . Despite his disclaimers, Hearst might well have written the telegram to Remington, but if he did, the war he was referring to was the one already being fought between the Cuban revolutionaries and the Spanish army, not the one the Americans would later fight.

Hearst's domestic life is well covered. He lived a sort of "captain's paradise," keeping up the semblance of a marriage, with a wife in New York and a much better known mistress in California. More than a chapter is devoted to his mistress, the second-rate actress Marion Davies. Pity the Hearst newspaper film critic who had to review her movies.

One of the main contributions of *The Chief* is to show Hearst's involvement in American politics. If he could not be president, then at least he could be a kingmaker. At times he controlled delegates at conventions. But where did he stand? At various times he was for municipal ownership of utilities and against government intervention; in foreign affairs, he could be a jingoist, an isolationist, and an interventionist.

Moviegoers and film historians, not to mention the general reader, will be interested in the full chapter that Nasaw devotes to *Citizen Kane,* the great Orson Welles movie about Hearst. Tongue in cheek, the *New York Times* Hollywood correspondent reported that

> Mr. Welles says the film, which deals with the life of a fictional figure who owns a chain of newspapers, who unsuccessfully runs for Governor of New York, who boasts that he started the Spanish-American war, who marries an obscure singer and attempts to gain recognition for her as an opera star through his publications, and who finally retires to a fabulous castle to die when his newspaper empire crumbles, is in no sense biographical. Representatives of William Randolph Hearst have advised the producer that they believe another interpretation can be put on the story.

Nasaw writes: "Orson Welles may have been a great filmmaker, but he was neither a historian nor a biographer. 'You know, the real story of Hearst is quite different from Kane's,' Welles later told Peter Bogdanovich. 'And Hearst himself—as a man, I mean—was very different.' "

The Chief deserves a prominent place on the American journalism bookshelf, right next to W. A. Swanberg's fine 1961 biography, *Citizen Hearst.*

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Out of the Arctic

GIVE ME MY FATHER'S BODY
By Kenn Harper. Steerforth Press. $24.

Reviewed by ROGER GATHMAN

On a cold February evening in 1898, an observer on the grounds of the American Museum of Natural History might have witnessed a strange and unprecedented ceremony: a weeping eight-year-old Eskimo boy watching as a number of grown white men, employees of the museum, lowered a coffin into a hole that they had dug. This burial was performed at dusk "for fear of attracting too much attention from the street which might invite an investigation that would prove disastrous." Among the men were one William Wallace, superintendent of the museum building and a general factotum for the museum's most powerful donor, Morris Jesup, and Alfred Kroeber, an anthropologist and assistant to Franz Boas, the most famous anthropologist in America. The crying boy was named Minik, and he was under the impression that his father, Qisuk, was being buried.

Despite appearances, Minik's father wasn't being buried that night. Instead, Kroeber, in collusion with Wallace and Boas, had taken a log, wrapped it in furs and put a mask on it, then put it in a coffin. Apparently the men kept the boy far enough away from the fake corpse to deceive him successfully.

Qisuk couldn't be produced that night for a real burial. He was—perhaps even as the ceremony was taking place—being dissected. His brain ended up in a laboratory, where it was photographed and studied. The photographs are still on display in *American Anthropology*, volume 3, one showing "Qisuk's cerebrum (dorsal aspect)" and another "Qisuk's cerebrum (basal aspect)." The body, evidently, was run through

Roger Gathman is a freelance writer living in Austin, Texas.

Advertisement

THE MODERNITY OF JESUS' ETHIC OVER JUDEO-CHRISTIAN ETHIC

Yes, the historical Jesus was quite different from the Jesus of the New Testament and the Judeo-Christian tradition. Critical scrutiny has exposed the New Testament's depiction as having been largely fabricated, fabricated so well that attempts to detect its nuggets of historicity are speculative and unconvincing. A new approach, one that can be justified as historically sound, is to assume that the recently discovered ancient book labeled *The Gospel of Thomas* is what it claims to be: enigmatic sayings of Jesus noted by Thomas as he accompanied him (from the onset of Jesus' evangelism until the night before Jesus' arrest). This collection of *student notes* is the only documentation about Jesus that is arguably in real-time. His ethic is the antithesis of the traditional Christian ethic devised by those who believed that there is natural fellowship among rational beings and that some transcending authority (either divine or humanitarian) commands universal love of neighbor. The *Thomas* Jesus (with better claim to authenticity than the Christ of the New Testament) gives evidence of being a materialist and empiricist, with ethics much like the Epicurean: do not lie; do not do what you hate; do not discriminate by gender, class, or age; do not be a cynic or a skeptic; and be independent in thought. All these moral precepts stem from premises devoid of deism or theism. *The Gospel of Thomas* holds many surprises. Its text, complete and translated, and highly readable commentary are given in:

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a specialized machine on Wallace's farm. The machine was used to strip the flesh off animal specimens cleanly, in order to preserve the skeletons. It worked on Qisuk. Once his flesh had been stripped off, his skeleton was packed and delivered to the museum.

How did Minik and his father come to be in New York City in 1898? Minik's bizarre biography has been pieced together by Kenn Harper, an amateur historian—what the French call an *historien du dimanche*. Employing old newspaper clippings, memoirs, and letters, his story is a fascinating microhistorical tidbit. First published in Canada in the 1980s, it is a tale that, in miniature, speaks to the history of encounters between the West and the "people without history"—the aboriginal inhabitants of every explorer's terra incognita.

The polar expeditions of the 1890s were an extension of the impulse to bring science to the masses that had made Chicago's Columbian Exposition of 1893 such a success—although even then one acute observer, Henry Adams, noted that "nothing in education is so astonishing as the amount of ignorance it accumulates in the form of inert facts." There was, in fact, something paradoxical about reducing science to a pleasing visual arrangement of relics, live or dead, especially as the sciences were becoming increasingly complex and mathematically rigorous.

The American Museum of Natural History, as well as the Smithsonian, the National Geographic Society, and their numerous European counterparts, responded to the desire of the middle class for instruction and amusement by mounting exhibits that must have strongly resembled the kind of displays that could be seen in the great department stores. This was, after all, the epoch of the emporium. Between Marshall Field's famous interior display of furs at its flagship store in Chicago and the natural history museum's exhibit on the polar Eskimos, there was a real continuity of assumptions, both aesthetic and economic.

The eighteenth-century visitor to a "Wunderkammer" was engaging in a seriously informative activity, gaining a real sense of current scientific thinking—but by 1898, it was hard to pretend that exhibits were really giving visitors anything more than a reduced and derivative notion of what was "out there." The balance between diversion and instruction was tilting toward amusement, even as there were ever more "facts" to be learned. Hence the temptation to emphasize the exotic. Arctic explorers like Robert Peary—who five years earlier had made the first of three attempts to reach the North Pole—represented a new breed of hero who combined knowledge with athleticism.

Peary, however, was a conflicted hero. His endurance was amazing—but so was his greed. He was a good husband to his wife, but he also took up with a thirteen-year-old Eskimo girl and eventually had a child with her. His thievery, grave robbing, and smuggling lined his family's pockets. In 1897, he loaded the *Hope* with three meterorites, the Eskimos' sole source of iron. Though ostensibly he was donating the meteorites to the American Museum of Natural History, he actually received a $50,000 gratuity, arranged through a third party. The museum was clearly not too fastidious to provide a conduit by which Peary could bring his bones, relics, and furs uninspected into the country. Remember, too, that Peary was officially in the navy, which might reasonably have examined the profiteering of its on-leave officer.

On that same trip, Peary brought back to New York City not only meteors, but also six Eskimos. It was Boas's idea that Perry should eventually retrieve an Eskimo for scientific study, but neither Boas nor the museum was prepared for Peary's haul. Assuming that Eskimos would thrive in cold and damp, they first "stored" the Eskimos in the museum's basement. Not surprisingly, within a year's time four Eskimos had died. Peary took one of the two survivors, Uisaakassak, back to Greenland in 1898. The Eskimo's stories of New York earned him the sobriquet "The Big Liar" among his people. Minik, the youngest of the group, was informally adopted by William Wallace and stayed in the United States.

Unhappily for Minik, Wallace was caught embezzling from the museum. In fact, he seems to have siphoned off quite a fortune. When Jesup found out about the racket—the kickbacks from contractors, the vague items on bills—he had Wallace dismissed, but the museum did not press charges. Perhaps its directors were afraid of what the trial would reveal. Wallace, after all, knew a thing or two about Peary's use of the museum as a customs

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dodge. Wallace literally knew—and could say—where the bodies were buried. Before Wallace was caught with his hand in the till, Jesup had promised Minik a stipend. That, too, was cut off, leaving the charge of Minik's support wholly up to Wallace. But unlike any of the other white men we encounter in this sordid business, Wallace seems to have been a genuinely kind individual, albeit with a certain larcenous edge. He never abandoned Minik, though he must have been tempted to. Unhappily for Wallace, he was a better embezzler than businessman. After he lost his position with the museum, his fortune slowly but inexorably declined until, shed of his Lawyerville farm, he ended up in New York City. His family, which now included Minik, followed him there.

The scene was now set for Minik's next rendezvous with fame. It came on January 6, 1907, in the *New York World*'s Sunday supplement: over pictures of Minik and an artist's sketch of the pleading boy, his arms outstretched toward the museum, the headline blared, "Give Me My Father's Body." There were various accounts of how Minik discovered that he'd been deceived. Harper thinks Wallace's account is closest to the truth: he found out from schoolmates who'd seen Qisuk's skeleton on display. The *San Francisco Examiner* headlined its article "Why Arctic Explorer Peary's Neglected Eskimo Wants to Shoot Him."

This was not good publicity for a man seeking funds for his final dash to the Pole. It was also bad for the museum, which conducted a self-exculpatory internal investigation. Herman Bumpus, the museum's director, tried to stonewall the issue, denying that Qisuk's body was in the museum, but eventually he had to concede that perhaps his skeleton was. In the end, the press moved on and Minik failed to secure his father's remains. It wasn't until the first edition of Harper's book came out in the 1980s that the question of those remains was raised again. Under pressure from the U.S. government, which in 1990 mandated the reburial of improperly received Native American grave remains, and from the Danish government, which intervened belatedly on behalf of native Greenlanders, the museum finally disgorged all four Eskimos and shipped their remains back to the Thule district of Greenland, where they were properly buried. As for Minik, his failure to get back his father's remains apparently sealed his discontent with America. By this time he was in his teens. He briefly attended Manhattan College, took various odd jobs, and was noted for his appearances at the Arctic Club of America, where he was occasionally asked, as a favor, to wear his furs. His wish to go home was finally granted in 1910, when Peary's ship returned him to his own people.

Unfortunately, Minik discovered that he had no people. He had to relearn the Inuit tongue, he had to accustom himself to living as he had not lived since early childhood, and he didn't like it much. He acted as guide to the polar explorer Donald Baxter MacMillan, but finally went back to the United States in 1916—as a guest, once again, of the American Museum of Natural History. The newspapers, by this time, were focused on the war in Europe; the North Pole had become a side issue. Minik did appear, briefly, on Broadway, "dressed up in Eskimo garb," but show business was not his calling. He applied for and received American citizenship in 1917, got a job as a lumberjack in northern New Hampshire, and died there, a victim of the Spanish flu, in 1918.

Harper's narrow focus doesn't invite much pondering of the cosmic meaning of Minik's case, but there is something in the story that is irresistibly reminiscent of Herman Melville. It is the kind of tale that ironizes our romantic expectations of both the savage and the "deep divers," as Melville called scholars. Minik the Wild Child, attending the Arctic Club in his furs, is also a New York street kid who has his own ideas about Arctic exploration (he wanted to mount an all-Eskimo force) and is all too happy to make a few bucks in a vaudeville skit. Franz Boas, whose anthropological career honorably transcended the parochial racism of his time, was the same man who responded to the news of an Eskimo girl dying in a New York City hospital with a memo to his boss, Jesup, that read: "Little Eskimo girl died in Mt. Vernon. I have secured skeleton. $15."

Melville, you'll recall, was a customs inspector. Odd values attached to exotic goods were probably processed endlessly under his official gaze. But upon an item like "Little Eskimo girl" he would have paused for a long time; perhaps to sigh, much as he does at the end of *Bartleby the Scrivener:* Ah Minik! Ah humanity!

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THE READER REPLIES

ON NOT BEING A POET

Thomas Mallon defines the poet too narrowly, disparaging Shelley's conclusion that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." If poetry be merely metrics, short lines, vague thoughts, then Shelley was a fool. Shelley would have considered Isaac Newton a poet, and were Shelley alive in the twentieth century he might have been an astrophysicist. A poet is a maker—any maker of new, unknown thought. In 1750 few persons of knowledge opposed slavery, expected to educate women, dreamed of broader representation of the people, or doubted the authority of schools, courts, or church. By 1850 no serious thinker supported slavery, denied education, or wanted to reduce the franchise. By 1850 women challenged authority. Those changes came about long before legislation. The "makers," the poets, had shifted thought. William Blake and Percy Shelley helped, along with Newton, Robert Boyle, R. W. Emerson, Edmund Burke, and the host of revolutionary "makers" of new thought between 1750 and 1850.

Mallon may be unaware of John Stuart Mill's distinction between the language of knowledge and the language of power. Mallon wants knowledge, but the language of knowledge never moves beyond what we already have and already know. It doesn't change things as they are.

When Mallon objects that Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Windhover" is not English, he is exactly right. Reduce Hopkins's sonnet to English and it is banal: "One morning I saw a bird held up on air currents, and I thought about the power of the infinite." Sure. With the poem, a good reader (or hearer) catches the exhilaration, the epiphany, the sudden awareness of the oceanic, the moment beyond. Hopkins created a new language because the old language was dead. The "makers" who have new and strange insights about physics, chemistry, biology, sociology, or political science give us the new language rather than the dead language of Aristotelian physics, alchemy, and the rest. Makers shift the world. The fit audience, though few, will find Shelley's revolutionary insights, Newton's gravity, or Boyle's laws of gases. Or experience Hopkins's realization of being alive in a dazzling universe.

RICHARD C. TOBIAS
University of Pittsburgh

G & S

At the risk of resembling the character of whom the chorus sings in Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*, "Her taste exact for faultless fact amounts to a disease," I would like to point out a slight error in Stephen Jay Gould's otherwise charming article about those two artists. Gould implies that Gilbert says that his character John Wellington Wells is able to "prophesy with a wink of his eye" and that Gilbert refers to Wells as "a very small prophet." Actually, both of those quotations are from the patter song "My Name Is John Wellington Wells," which is sung by that character. However, the words that Gould cites are used by Wells to refer to a prophet in Wells's employ and not to Wells himself.

HOPE LEMAN
Corvallis, Oregon

"XERS" VS. "BOOMERS"

Margaret Morganroth Gullette's attack on my article "Work, Work, Work, Work" (*Modern Maturity*, May/June 1999) in her essay "'Xers' vs. 'Boomers': A Contrived War" could stand

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as a model of how personal bias distorts source readings. After saying that the American Association of Retired Persons "should know better" than to publish my piece—which has been republished several times, including a footnoted version in *Le Monde Diplomatique*—she adds that I was "allowed [*sic*] to state without evidence that 'Baby Boomers,' who came of age shouting their contempt for the man in the gray flannel suit, have done more than any other generation to erase the line between work and private life."

Her comments are demonstrably false and clearly intended to harm, which is what defines libel. I count three long cites in the two paragraphs following the quoted passage—a quote from Alvin Toffler, and surveys by Daniel Yankelovich and Catalyst, a nonprofit organization. Moreover, I was not "allowed to state" anything without providing documentation to *Modern Maturity*'s fact-checkers. Gullette's gratuitous suggestion that the AARP should look elsewhere for contributors is simply appallingly irresponsible.

She also managed to misread the entire article, if she read it in the first place. Anyone who looks at Labor Department figures can't ignore the recent rise in working hours simultaneous with the decline in real income. My article was about how this trend impacts our private lives. In no way does it hold Boomers responsible for this shift, which is what Gullette accuses me of saying: "The implication is that only younger people suffer from 24/7 and other deteriorations of working conditions. Name any such failure, and it can be blamed on Boomers rather than seen as the next wave of capitalism's power over labor." I neither wrote nor implied any of this, and she has no right to shove her inflamed rhetoric into my mouth.

MARK HUNTER
Université de Paris

Margaret Morganroth Gullette replies: As Mark Hunter's first paragraph indicates, I quoted him accurately. He does blame the "Boomers" for the dismal trend toward longer hours and less leisure. I share his dismay that these conditions are worsening. But the immediate cause is managers, of whatever age. (*The New Yorker* has described a Silicon Valley high-tech start-up that has bunk beds built over some of the desks.) As 24/7 rolls over America, some of its most alarming new manifestations are being invented by the newest managers in the workforce. But we shouldn't blame the "Xers" either.

The point of my essay was to make readers warier of any and all cohort or generational labels, because nonfalsifiable stereotypes get attached to them. Since the AARP is sensitive to ageism, I thought the editors of *Modern Maturity* should have caught Hunter's "Boomer-bashing" sentence. I did not mean to imply that they shouldn't have published his article (which is otherwise very supportive of midlife workers), and I'm sorry that he read my single sentence that way. As my entire essay demonstrates, journalists and pollsters often stereotype "aging Boomers" and "Xers" in all kinds of media, high and low, print and visual. I have no personal bias against any of them. Where age is concerned, I merely want the culture to stop and think.

THE MISTY CRYSTAL BALL

I have been drawn to Sherwin Nuland's column, "The Uncertain Art," because of the nuance in its title. His most recent installment, however, suggests nuance papered over with troubling glibness.

If medicine is an uncertain art, that uncertainty lies in the gossamer-thin distinction between creative art and cooperative art. Aristotle defined *creative* art as producing that which nature never could yield without man's action. Meanwhile, the fruits of *cooperative* art, among which Aristotle numbered medicine, could result whether or not man intervened, but were likelier to do so when he did.

The history of medicine has it hubristically trespassing into creative-art territory, wielding technologic interventions as if health could be achieved by "creative" (in Aristotle's sense) aims. The uncertainty of the art can lead us to equate attainment of health with, in a simple example, the masking of fever with drugs. Yet such treatment, philosophically, is nothing more than creative art: nature causes the fever for a purpose, and sup-

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pressing it has been shown to prolong infectious disease.

Comes now to our night table Dr. Nuland and his supreme confidence in how technology will make twenty-first-century medicine eclipse all that came before. What Promethean confidence he has in gene therapy, voice-operated remote-control surgical systems, and three-dimensional scanning! Even the "real mechanism by which factors like faith, psychological profile, suggestion, and placebos sometimes influence outcome will be critically scrutinized." So Philistine is his prospectus for the future that I fully expected him to predict the demise of prayer owing to its deconstruction by science.

I do not share Dr. Nuland's optimism and find it not befitting a historian of his stature. His assertion "During the course of the twenty-first century, we will become biomedically much wiser than we are today" may be accurate, but only because the sort of wisdom in his essay is so conventional and so prevalent. Most medical practices are made up primarily of patients with diseases attributable to overnutrition, physical inactivity, or self-abuse. Meanwhile, Dr. Nuland would do well to read Harry Mulisch's fine novel *The Discovery of Heaven*, in which Sir Francis Bacon makes a deal with the devil: his soul in exchange for imparting the scientific method to mankind. Bacon knows it will bring him eternal fame, and the devil knows that the scientific method, which will corrode faith, is ultimately the best way to ruin mankind.

MARK W. SWAIM, M.D.
Durham, North Carolina

Sherwin B. Nuland replies: Dr. Swaim appears not to have been reading my columns beyond what draws him to them, namely the title. Medicine is an uncertain art for reasons far more unsettling and with infinitely graver consequences than the "gossamer-thin distinction" he finds in Aristotelian thought, or even the "hubris" of doctors who think they are actually helping people. It is uncertain in a sense so direct and immediate as to sweep past the luxury of philosophical theoretics or armchair lucubrations. For explication, I refer my learned correspondent to the first of these essays, in the Spring 1998 issue, in which the very real implications of clinical uncertainty are described. Aristotle—a biological researcher who, by the bye, would have loved the scientific method had he but foreseen it—would certainly have understood my meaning, without resorting to lofty pother.

Or since Dr. Swaim finds me so glib (a charge, incidentally, to which I have preemptively confessed, in the penultimate paragraph of the article of which he is so critical), he might wish to consult the work of a nonphysician observer, the *mater et magistra* of medical sociology, Renée Fox, while I peruse Harry Mulisch's fiction. Since publishing a classic article on the subject in 1957, Professor Fox has written extensively on the uncertainties of medicine, not as they are cynically contemplated in some academian grove of therapeutic iconoclasm, but as they are witnessed in their stark reality at the bedside.

Dr. Swaim further accuses me of indiscriminate optimism about the future of biomedicine. Here, too, I refer him to an earlier column, "Narcissus Looks into the Laboratory" (Autumn 1998), in which I am revealed to hold quite the opposite view. Should he choose to read it, he will find that I am neither Philistine nor Pollyanna—at least when it comes to science.

I am well aware that the science of biomedicine and the art of healing do indeed sometimes clash. The lines of conflict are precisely where wisdom is needed, of the old-fashioned kind. If I understand Dr. Swaim's drift, that is what he is asking for. In this, at least, we are in agreement.

JOURNAL

The things Mary Gordon puts in her journal, and the way she writes, makes me wish that I knew her. And though she would like to be rid of "the desire . . . to be admired," I would like her to know that she is.

DAVID MCMANAWAY
Dallas, Texas

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The Podium

Fireworks

GEORGE PLIMPTON

The Fourth of July is the greatest day of the year. School is out, you can go barefoot, and, best of all, there are fireworks. In my youth, of course, they were legal. I'd order them from catalogues—Roman candles, snakes in the grass, an octopus with twenty-four tentacles—and they'd arrive in a great package, which my parents would keep locked up until the big day so I wouldn't scare the family cat. Finally night would fall, and my grandfather would touch a lighted punk to the first fuse.

In the army I was a demolitions specialist, so I came to learn about fuses and shells and mortars and blasting caps and bursting charges, all of which are used in fireworks. I'd be the first to admit that, as with all explosives, it is important to follow safety-first procedures. I have contributed at least twice to the annals of pyrotechnic accidents, once on Long Island when a spark landed on a man's shoulder—he sued me for eleven million dollars—and once when a seven-hundred-pound shell set off more than fifty burglar alarms in Titusville, Florida.

In the waning days of his administration, Mayor John Lindsay asked me if I wanted to be New York City's Commissioner of Parks. I told him no—honored, but too pressured with writing and so on. "Commissioner of Public Affairs?" Sorry, I said. "Well, what *do* you want to be?" he asked, rather petulantly. "Commissioner of Fireworks," I said. He gave me an odd nod, which I took for agreement. It's an honorary position, of course. Another mayor, in a small Chinese village, once invited me to sit with him at the edge of a meadow and watch fireworks. They all had fanciful names like "The Monkeys Enter the Heavenly Temple and Drive Out the Tiger." Ever since then, I've known just how I want to spend my declining years. I want to go to China and name fireworks. I'll sit in a comfortable chair and watch them detonate, and I'll say, "Let's call that one 'The Great Frog Leaps Off the Lily Pad and Frightens Ten Silver Minnows!' Let's call *that* one 'The Blue Ox Comes Down the Turnpike!'"

—from a talk at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, June 16, 2000

George Plimpton is editor of *The Paris Review*. His books include *Paper Lion, Truman Capote,* and *Fireworks;* his latest, *Pet Peeves or Whatever Happened to Doctor Rawff?*, will be published this fall.

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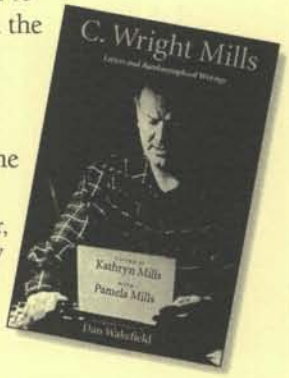

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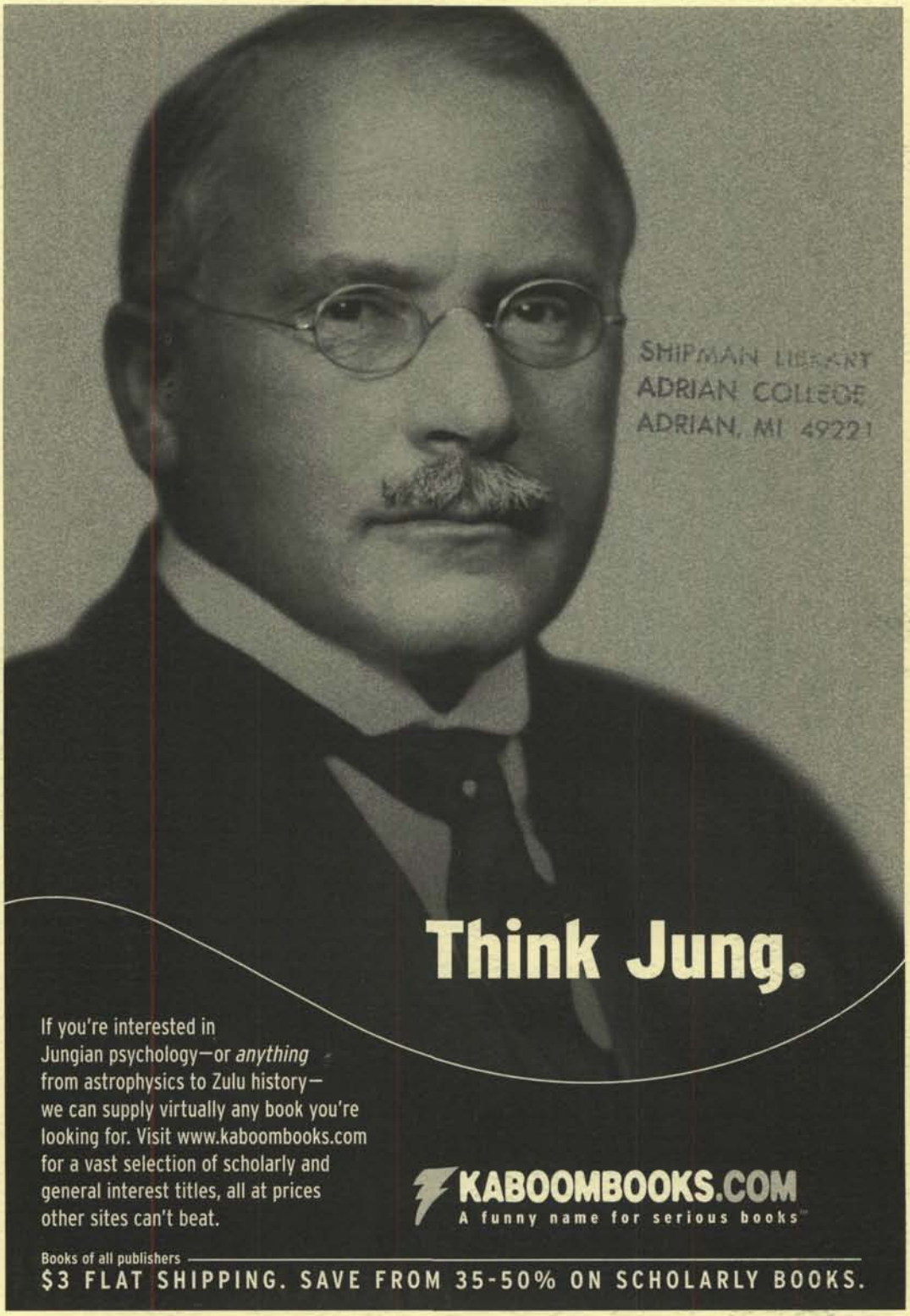

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